

A Psycho-Neuro-Marxist Analysis of Troy Maxson in August Wilson's *Fences* (1986)

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Abstract

Around the mid-20th century, the lives of African Americans were characterized by severe segregationist laws and mass racial violence. However, the period saw many firsts for black Americans and sowed the seeds for upcoming civil-rights movement, too. The racial tension of the period has been reflected in a variety of literary works composed during this time. Set in 1950s Pittsburgh, August Wilson's *Fences* (1986) portrays the struggles of its protagonist, Troy Maxson, as he navigates through the challenging times. Drawing on Jodi Melamed's notion of racial capitalism (2015) and Mark Solms's neuropsychanalytic model of affective consciousness (2021), this article situates Troy's life within structural mechanisms of racial differentiation and exclusion, along with analyzing Troy's diverse affective responses shaped by his lived experience. Through a critical analysis of Troy's character, the paper argues that Troy's personality depicts an internalization of racial capitalism where systemic racial-economic exploitation results in inscribing flawed notions of masculinity, emotional defensiveness, and interpersonal failure in the subject. Ultimately, the study reveals a tragic figure caught in a web of memory, masculinity, and material hardship, depicting Troy Maxson as a symbol of psychological and political tragedy.

Keywords: August Wilson, Troy Maxson, Affect, Racial Capitalism, Survival

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August Wilson's *Fences*, first performed in 1986, stands as a monumental work in African American theatre and is the sixth play in Wilson's acclaimed Pittsburgh Cycle, a ten-part series chronicling the black experience in America across decades. Set in 1950s Pittsburgh, *Fences* captures a pivotal moment in American history when racial tensions, post-war optimism, and economic inequalities coexisted. Against this backdrop unfolds the deeply personal and socially resonant story of Troy Maxson, a former Negro League baseball player who now works as a garbage collector. The narrative explores how dreams once deferred turn into emotional barricades, and how systemic injustices shape not only material outcomes but also inner lives. Troy Maxson emerges as a deeply flawed yet strikingly human character, charismatic and powerful, yet wounded by past trauma and embittered by unrealized ambitions. His internal struggles, born of childhood abuse, racial discrimination, and professional disappointment, manifest in rigid worldviews, emotional repression, and strained relationships, particularly with his wife, Rose and his son, Cory. Through Troy, Wilson does not merely paint a picture of one man's fall but rather constructs a microcosm of broader black working-class suffering in post-war America. *Fences* compels the audience to look beyond individual failure and explore the psychological roots of intergenerational trauma, fractured masculinity, and class-based disenfranchisement.

Within the theoretical framework that drawn upon the works of Jodi Melamed and Mark Solms, this article argues that Troy's personality depicts an internalization of racial capitalism where systemic racial-economic exploitation results in inscribing flawed notions of masculinity, emotional defensiveness, and interpersonal failure in the subject. Moreover, *Fences* is more than just Troy's story. It is a

commentary on systemic disempowerment. The play explores how capitalism alienates individuals from meaningful labor, and how race intensifies that alienation. As a garbage collector, Troy performs labor that is essential yet undervalued. His body wears out while his soul finds no fulfillment. He wins a minor victory in becoming the first black driver of a garbage truck, but it is a hollow triumph, emblematic of the limited mobility afforded to black laborers. His entire worldview is shaped by such contradictions; achievement without joy, duty without freedom, and love without intimacy.

Critical Scholarship on *Fences*

August Wilson's *Fences* has received considerable scholarly attention for its rich portrayal of African American identity, intergenerational dynamics, systemic racism, and socioeconomic exclusion in post-World War II America. As a canonical text within African American literature and theatre, the play has been the subject of numerous critical interpretations ranging from historical and cultural analyses to psychological and ideological readings. At the center of this scholarly discourse is the complex figure of Troy Maxson, whose character has been analyzed to "support" the "claim that gender construction and race are inextricable" (Hampton 2002, p. 195). Analyzing *Fences* and Arthur Miller's *Death of the Salesman*, Hampton explores the way black masculinity is constructed, contending that Troy's notion of masculinity, based on "images of rape, rage, misogyny," is "an incomplete narrative" that solely serves to "misguide adult Troy in his own experiences of manhood and fatherhood" (2002, p. 198). Troy's manhood is closely linked with his choice to join the Negro League, as a young man. It is interesting to note that the game of baseball has "long been regarded as a metaphor for the American dream—an expression of hope, democratic values, and the drive for individual success"

(Koprince 2006, p. 349). In this context, Koprince maintains that baseball serves both as history and myth in the play, whereas Wilson allows his character “to echo the feelings of actual black ballplayers who were denied a chance to compete at the major-league level” (2006, p. 349).

In the same vein, Letzler critically analyzes Troy’s batting career as discussed in the play to contend that “Troy’s plate approach does not sound like that of a great hitter” (2014, p. 305). Letzler further notes that Troy’s speech is replete with “extensive baseball metaphors” (2014, p. 305), concluding that the playwright “understood the great smallness of the man he wished to celebrate” (2014, p. 309). While Letzler’s analysis proves that Troy and his friend, Bono’s claims to greatness may be exaggerated, Walton believes that Troy endeavors to pursue “the elusive American dream” which may manifest itself in “material goods” (2003, p. 57). Despite all the tragedy Troy suffers, Walton contends that Troy is a “survivor” (2003, p. 62). Unlike Letzler, Walton insists that Maxson “went down swinging at the universe” and in doing so, he is proud of “a dream dared and won true” (2003, p. 64). Walton analyzes Troy’s refusal to allow his son, Cory, to join the League as a “means of active retaliation, a revolutionary act” (2003, p. 63). In this way, Walton establishes Troy as a tragic hero of great dimensions.

On the other hand, in an analysis of the father-son conflict, Wattley contends that Troy “establishes his dominance and authority as head of the household and family provider” (2010, p. 4). Wattley further notes that while Troy may try to teach his son Cory “good values,” he utterly lacks “effervescence and verbal expressions of love” required for the purpose (2010, p. 5). The very conflict arises from the fact that Troy, while being the father figure, is against the idea of his sons following his footsteps or “experienc[ing] the kind of life he

has undergone” (Wattley 2010, p. 6). Through the play, “Wilson brings to the forefront the plight of African Americans in their pursuit of the American dream” (Wattley 2010, p. 16). However, while Maxson’s efforts “to surmount the fences that enclose him at work and at home” make his life tragic, the play also depicts “the destructive effect of his efforts on those around him” (Davis 2015, p. 48). Troy’s family suffers on his account, and the one who suffers the most is his wife, Rose.

Whereas Troy Maxson has received the most critical attention, the play has also been analyzed for Wilson’s depiction of African American women in “traditional roles” such as “nurturing wives, mothers, organizers, and pillars of strength” on the one hand, and “free-wheeling, independent sides” of these women, on the other (Shannon 1991, p. 2). In this way, while the previous research has mainly focused on Troy Maxson’s tragedy in relation to his pursuit of the American dream, his love for baseball, and his destructive influence on his family, this research argues that Troy’s personality depicts an internalization of racial capitalism where systemic racial-economic exploitation results in inscribing flawed notions of masculinity, emotional defensiveness, and interpersonal failure in the subject. Drawing on Jodi Melamed’s concept of racial capitalism and Mark Solms’s notion of affective consciousness, the article analyzes the way Troy’s personality evolves as a result of his interaction with structures of systemic violence.

Racial Capitalism and Affective Survival Formation

This section provides a comprehensive account of the theoretical models that inform this study. The analytical framework of this study draws on Jodi Melamed’s concept of ‘racial capitalism’ and Mark Solms’s notions of ‘homeostatic regulation’ and ‘affect-based consciousness’ in order to argue that Troy’s rigidity, moral degradation, and flawed masculinity stem from a traumatic psyche

shaped by continued exposure to racialized economic conditions. The framework highlights the interplay between the unconscious mind and material realities, revealing how trauma, repression, labor, and class intersect to produce a nuanced understanding of identity and tragedy in the African American experience.

In her essay, “Racial Capitalism” (2015), Melamed criticizes traditional Marxist frameworks for having believed that “European bourgeois society would rationalize social relations,” which racialized the social relations (p. 76). Rather, for Melamed, “capitalism *is* racial capitalism” as it operates by “producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups” (p. 77, original emphasis). For Melamed, the “procedures of racialization and capitalism are ultimately never separable from each other” (p. 77). Melamed contends that “capital partitions, divides, and separates groups between political geographies” while at the same time acting as “the dominant relation to flow between and bind them” (p. 81). In this way, modern capitalism depends on differentiating among various human groups, which implies that “accumulation for financial asset owning classes” requires “violence toward others and seeks to expropriate for capital the entire field of social provision” (Melamed 2015, p. 76). Criticizing state practices of “supposedly rational violence” Melamed contends that these practices offer “counterviolence to the violence of race,” hence becoming an “agent of racial cruelty” (p. 77). Analysis of the way capitalism and racism work together, helps Melamed conclude that whereas capitalism requires “loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value,” racism “enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires” (p. 77).

In this way, capitalism is established through “displacing the uneven life chances,” also a characteristic of racism. Drawing a parallel

between racial capitalism and “white supremacist capitalist development,” Melamed contends that both manifest themselves through “slavery, colonialism, genocide, incarceration regimes, migrant exploitation, and contemporary racial warfare” (p. 77). Hence, Melamed’s conclusion that “procedures of racialization and capitalism are ultimately never separable from each other” (p. 77). Racial capitalism works by separating “forms of humanity so they may be connected in terms that feed capital” (p. 79). Melamed praises the role of black radical tradition in defying “racial capitalist modes of differentiation that would undermine conditions for peoplehood,” hence acting as “antiracist, anticapitalist” in its struggle to “arrange social forces for Black survival over and against capital accumulation” (p. 80). Thus, the hallmark of racial capitalism is the “manufacturing densely connected social separateness” (p. 81). Melamed concludes by highlighting the significance of “indigenous activism” in order to strengthen “terms of relationality that defend collective existence from racial capitalism’s systematic expropriation” (p. 83). Hence, Melamed’s notion of racial capitalism provides a structural explanation of Troy’s tragedy. The lens helps in analyzing Troy’s frustration and rigidity as products of his interaction with systemic exploitation that normalizes inequality and injustice for African Americans.

In addition to racial capitalism, this article engages with Mark Solms’s idea of affective consciousness. In his book, *The Hidden Spring: A Journey to the Source of Consciousness* (2021), Mark Solms explores the essential features of affect and contends that “we don’t always know why we feel things, we certainly know *what* we feel” (p. 95, original emphasis). For Solms, affective states widely differ from other mental states in that “they are hedonically valenced: they feel ‘good’ or ‘bad’” (p. 96). It is “the goodness or badness of a feeling” that informs us about “the state of biological need that lies behind it” (Solms 2021, p. 96). In this way, “it is ‘good’

to survive and . . . ‘bad’ not to do so” (Solms 2021, p. 96). Therefore, the motivation behind an individual’s actions is not biological value but “rather the subjective feelings they give rise to. . . even if we do not intellectually endorse them” (Solms 2021, p. 96). Since consciousness begins with feeling, “separation distress feels bad and we respond to it by seeking reunion. Fear feels bad and we escape it by fleeing the danger” (Solms 2021, p. 97). As a result, feelings compel us to “do something *necessary*,” hence acting as “measures of demands for work” (Solms 2021, p. 97, original emphasis). The presence of affect is the error which needs to be corrected. In this way, the only way to resolve an affect is to do the required action that ensures “that an error has been successfully corrected,” and consequently, “it disappears from the radar of consciousness” (Solms 2021, p. 97).

This makes affects “subjective manifestation” with drives; they serve to inform us “how well or badly things are going in relation to the specific needs they measure” (Solms 2021, p. 97). Thus, feeling is “inextricable from the bodily state it entrains,” and the state of being unconscious of a feeling entails that it is “not a feeling” because feelings are “always conscious” (Solms 2021, p. 98). Additionally, Solms describes affective valence as our feelings about what is acceptable (good) and what is not (bad) contending that this is the force that “guides us in unpredicted situations” (p. 183). Furthermore, consciousness “guides our choices when we find ourselves in the dark” (Solms 2021, p. 183). This gives rise to the Law of Affect that states that “voluntary behavior. . . bestows an enormous adaptive advantage over involuntary behavior.” And in this way, “it liberates us from the shackles of automaticity and enables us to survive in unpredicted situations” (Solms 2021, p. 100). Solms believes that feelings contribute to the complex mechanisms human beings use for staying alive. In this way, the

addition of feelings to the existing “survival mechanisms” is responsible for the appearance of a unique entity in the universe and that is “subjective being” (p. 100). In addition, an extended form of affect becomes “homeostasis”. Homeostasis is “a basic biological mechanism that arose naturally with self-organisation” (Solms 2021, p. 287). Hence, the “complex dynamic mechanisms” stem from “the survival imperative” (Solms 2021, p. 287). Solms further contends that “the actions that are generated by prioritized affects are voluntary,” however, these are “subject to here-and-now choices rather than pre-established algorithms” (288). Solms’s theoretical lens helps in analyzing Troy’s intense rage, defensiveness, and rigid masculinity as affective survival strategies resulting from chronic exposure to racial and economic exploitation. Coupled with Melamed’s racial capitalism, Solms’s notion helps analyze Troy’s psyche which evolves as a site where structural violence becomes emotionally sedimented.

Troy Maxson: A Case of Destructive Masculinity, Rage, and Rigidity

Divided in two-acts, August Wilson’s Pulitzer-prize winner play, *Fences* (1986), depicts black experience in the United States in the 1950s. Interestingly, published in 1986, the play is set in the pre-civil-rights movement and pre-Vietnam-war America in Wilson’s hometown, Pittsburgh. Revolving around the tragic life and endless struggles of the protagonist, Troy Maxson, the play makes a case for the limited nature of opportunities offered to black Americans who are denied the freedom to reap the fruit of their own talents and skills. Having lived in the south and presently living in the north, Troy Maxson’s second name is a reference to the Mason-Dixon line that historically separated the Southern slave states and free states of the North. The play is written in the backdrop of the season Hank Aaron led the Milwaukee Braves to the World Series, defeating the

New York Giants. Hence, Wilson highlights the black leadership in the professional league, proving that the blacks were not only able to beat white players but were also capable of championing the game altogether. After having spent a considerable portion of their lives in the south, black men in the play, including Troy, try to find their way in the world, ending up entangled in a harshly competitive capitalist society where survival became a challenge. Wilson has sketched the 1950s as a dismal time in the lives of his black characters, beset by the segregationist laws and socio-economic hardship. However, this was also a time that heralded various firsts for blacks reflected in the change that appears in the lives of younger characters to the bewilderment of the older ones.

The play opens on a Friday, the payday, with Troy and Bono enjoying their weekly ritualistic drinking and gossiping at Troy's house. Upset about the segregationist policies of the company where Troy works as well as experiencing a strict distribution of labor among blacks and whites, he questions his boss about the truck driving opportunity denied to him on racial grounds: "Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting? . . . You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck" (p. 9). Troy's questions indicate a black men's protest against white privilege that is supported by systemic racial exploitation. Troy's "don't I count?" is an outcry of a black man who has long been a victim to racial capitalism that denies monetary opportunities to blacks (p. 9). It is confrontation with this systemic socio-economic exploitation that prevents Troy from approving his son Cory's choice to join football: "The white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football" (p. 14). Troy's disapproval stems from his own experience as a ball player: "What it ever get me? Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of" (p. 14). His own experiences with structural barriers are so deeply etched in his mind that he is incapable of

looking beyond these to see the change now that “they got lots of colored boys playing ball now. Baseball and football” (p. 15). Troy insists on his traumatic past experience: “I’m talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don’t care what color you were” (p. 15). Troy’s anger reflects the way racial capitalism differentiates human capacity to justify unequal opportunities offered to various groups, hence depicting capitalism’s “group-differentiated vulnerabilities” (Melamed 2015, p. 78). Troy’s race makes him less valuable, not his ball talent.

It is interesting to note that on Bono’s alarm upon Troy’s excessive drinking, the latter gets interested in the phenomenon of death which he believes is “part of life” reiterating “we al gonna die” (p. 16). For Troy, death is nothing to be afraid of: “I ain’t worried about Death. I done see him, I done wrestled with him” (p. 16). Troy mentions Death as an opponent he confronted once, referring to his time in the hospital battling Pneumonia, when Death would try to get the best of Troy and the latter would “reach down deep inside myself and find the strength to do him one better” (p. 17). Troy narrates the experience as a wrestling between himself and Death where the latter tried to “get the best of me” and Troy fought heroically to defeat it, insisting “I ain’t going easy” (p. 17). Lost in a deep reverie of his feat, Troy describes the battle as that of a tragic hero against his deadly adversary wearing “a white robe with a hood on it,” a subtle reference to Death’s resemblance with white Americans (p. 17). In this way, Troy’s narration of fantasizing victory over his adversary is his Solmsian attempt to regulate an affect that is both overwhelming and forbidding.

Troy’s mythologizing of danger and his feat of bravery are his attempts to manage fear. Troy is once again confronted with feat when Cory confirms that he has been recruited by a college football team, leaving his job at A&P. To Cory’s surprise, the news of Mr. Stawicki “coming all the way from North Carolina” to see Cory play

is not news for Troy (p. 37). He firmly rejects the idea by asserting that “the white man ain’t gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway” (p. 37). He would rather want Cory to continue with A&P in order to master the art of fixing cars and building houses, the decent jobs, so that he does not have to be “hauling people’s garbage,” like his father (p. 37). Despite his own desire to be a successful footballer and his keen interest in football, Troy’s refusal to allow his son the chance reveals intertwining of Troy’s trauma and racial capitalism. His fear of Cory’s failure as a footballer stems from his own experiences of structural exclusion. In this way, Troy’s fear of a dismal future for Cory is an indication of the former’s fear system overriding his “seeking system” (Solms 2021, p. 33), hence denying an opportunity to Cory. This fear is deeply linked with the racial economic dynamics of his past which make his life subject to systemic exploitation: “I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get” (p. 40). While Troy’s reaction to Cory’s news is interpreted as cruel by Cory and his mother, Rose, the audience interprets it as tragic.

Troy’s tragedy is strongly connected with his idea of masculinity: “A man got to take care of his family” (p. 39). His authoritarian behavior towards Cory’s decision to play football stems from his notion of how a man must be obeyed by his brood: “You live in my house . . . sleep you behind on my bedclothes. . . fill you belly up with my food . . . cause you my son” (p. 39). Ironically, he protests the idea that he must love Cory because he is his son; rather, he would provide for Cory “[c]ause it’s my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you” (p. 40). Being a victim of racial capitalism for too long, Troy is unable to see the difference between his relationship with his son, Cory, and his boss Mr. Rand. He believes that his boss pays him his salary not out of love but because Troy works for him, and if Troy provides for his son, the son in

return must obey his commanding behavior. His attitude towards his son results from his faulty belief that obedience results in survival. Troy's toughness and strict demeanor towards his son are manifestations of racial capitalism that demands black men to become invulnerable in order to challenge systemic vulnerability that represents black men as "dangerous criminals, sexual deviants, irresponsible partners, absent fathers, and careless lovers" (Siddiqi and Sohail, p. 15). In this way, these affective responses develop into personality traits as a result of Solmsian notion of internalization of such performances.

In the same vein, Troy's confession about his love affair with Alberta is an indication of his emotional deprivation as Alberta makes him feel happy and contented, evading the true responsibilities and hectic life he has at home: "I can sit up in her house and laugh . . . I can laugh out loud . . . and it feels good. It reaches all the way down to the bottom of my shoes" (p. 66). In this way, Alberta offers temporary relief from racial capitalist exploitative experiences, a space where his potential is not measured in terms of labor or patriarchal responsibility. Similarly, Alberta represents affective relief, however destructive it may be. It is interesting to note that the scene presents emotional asymmetry through Rose's response to the confession: "I been standing with you! . . . I gave eighteen years of my life to stand in the same spot with you" (p. 67). Troy's inability to reciprocate Rose's faithfulness depicts the exhaustion of his emotional capacity. Melamed's racial capitalism is responsible for the asymmetrical bond that exists between Troy and Rose. Just like other black women, Rose tried her best to carry the emotional burden in her relationship with a black man victimized by structural violence. Indeed, African American women have historically been positioned as bearers of emotional and communal uplift within racialized structures of inequality, a role shaped not only by

postbellum ideologies of racial uplift but also by African American cultural heritage (Siddiqi 2022). All her married life, she “took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams . . . and I buried them inside you” (p. 67).

Tory's survival philosophy culminates in the final clash between father and son. Troy is unable to come to terms with the change Cory represents. While Cory represents a world that offers inclusive opportunities to black men, Troy's past is a manifestation of white “use of violence and brutality to refrain black men from asserting their manhood and using their agency and power to resist power structures” (Sohail and Siddiqi 2023, p. 9). Therefore, Cory's challenge for a physical fight with Troy is interpreted as an existential threat by Troy instead of taking it as a conflict between a father and a son. Solmsian feeling disintegrates into defensive affect, which is manifested in the form of excessive control, aggression, and intense anger, whenever survival is threatened. Hence, the moment Cory moves towards Troy, the latter is all charged up: “You just gonna walk over top of me in my own house?” (p. 79). The perceived threat to his survival and his possession appears to be a challenge to his very self: “You done got so grown to where you gonna take care. You gonna take over my house . . . You gonna go in there and stretch out on my bed” (p. 79-80). He challenges his son's notion of masculinity which contradicts his own that demands a man to have a house of his own, irrespective of the way he treats his wife or his sons: “You go on and be a man and get your own house. You can forget about this. Cause this is mine” (p. 80). Ironically, the more powerless he feels as a father and as an old man to keep his family bonded, the more he demands control over the situation. This is indicative of Solmsian neuro-affective response to situations which render an individual powerless on certain

occasions. Troy's defensive behavior stems from the systemic racial capitalism that denies him a dignified existence.

Hence, Troy Maxson is a paradigmatic subject for such analysis. His life story is replete with elements that suggest deep psychological repression. Having grown up under an abusive father, Troy internalizes a rigid, patriarchal model of masculinity, one that equates affection with weakness and authority with control. His troubled relationship with his son Cory can be seen as a replay of his own unresolved father-son conflict. Troy's emotional detachment, particularly from his wife and children, reflects a broader psychological defense. By exploring these dimensions, the paper demonstrates how Troy's internal life is saturated with unresolved grief, unmet desires, and unacknowledged fears. These elements are not only personal but symptomatic of larger structural constraints.

Thus, analyzed through the theoretical framework of Melamed's racial capitalism and Solms's affective neuropsychanalysis, Troy Maxson represents a traumatic figure whose personal trauma is historically structured. Troy's personality manifests the intricate working of internal repression and systemic exploitation. He is not simply a flawed individual but a product of historical trauma, racial discrimination, and class-based alienation, forces that he internalizes and expresses through patterns of control, denial, and emotional detachment. All through his tragic life, Troy has practiced affective adaptations to systemic threats resulting in anger, defensiveness, and emotional outbursts. In this way, *Fences* can be read as far more than a black family drama; rather, it becomes a study of interaction between social structures and human psyche, a depiction of the way oppression is linked with feelings, feelings that become an integral part of personality, and the way personality shapes destiny.

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