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## “Toxic Masculinity and What it Represents in *Fences*”

By Max Salters

For centuries, American gender roles have impacted relationships, including the relationships men have with themselves. August Wilson highlights how toxic masculinity manifests itself in his play *Fences*. The protagonist, Troy Maxson, embodies the three main aspects of toxic masculinity: power, anti-femininity, and aggression. Through his play, Wilson takes the stance that toxic masculinity imposes standards that harm interpersonal relationships.

Troy asserts power over his son, Cory, by disregarding his emotions. Although Cory expresses his passion for football and tells Troy about his success, Troy responds within his role as the patriarch. “I don’t care what nobody else say. I’m the boss... you understand? I’m the boss around here. I do the only saying that counts” (Wilson 36). Instead of affirming his son and his hobbies, he denies them and forces Cory to stop pursuing what he values. As a father, Troy demands respect by controlling his children. “You live in my house... sleep you behind on my bedclothes... fill you belly up with my food... cause you my son. Not ‘cause I like you!” (Wilson 38). His parenting style is narcissistic, caring for his children's innate needs without putting effort into nurturing them, because he lacks the empathy to relate to them. His constant need to assert his dominance over his children stems from his father being socialized as unempathetic and entitled.

Troy’s stubbornness prevents him from seeing his wife’s, Rose, role in the house as equally important. His anti-femininity displays itself through their relationship. Troy’s delusions of grandeur not only contribute to how greatly he sees himself but how little he thinks of Rose. “Woman... I do the best I can do... I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets” (Wilson 40). Although

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Troy does provide for his family, he negates the domestic labor Rose experiences to maintain a functional household. Toxic masculinity enforces the belief that roles that are deemed feminine are easier and of less importance than ones that are deemed masculine. “That’s all I got Rose. That’s all I got to give. I can’t give nothing else” (Wilson 40). Troy sees his position in the household as the most burdensome because he, unrealistically, believes that Rose’s role of a mother grants her luxury.

Although Troy rarely admits to weakness, he does so in a way that reflects how insecure he is. For example, it is revealed within the first scene that Troy is cheating on Rose. He only brings this information to her attention after he learns that the woman is pregnant, an entire act later. He takes accountability for his behavior, explaining that it gave him an escape. “I can step out of the house and get away from all the pressures and problems... be a different man. I ain’t got to wonder how I’m gonna pay the bills or get the roof fixed” (Wilson 69). This is a blatant display of emotional avoidance: Troy represses his stress regarding his home and job, and instead of communicating them effectively, he betrays the woman he loves most as a means of embracing a different identity who doesn’t face the same struggles. His actions reflect a lack of empathy. “I’m responsible for it. I done locked myself into a pattern trying to take care of you all that I forgot about myself” (Wilson 69). This was a decision that Troy made for himself to ease the pain he felt, but it never occurred to him that this would eventually hurt Rose. His actions directly impact their relationship, as they stay together physically but become emotionally distant. “You ain’t wanted to talk to me for months... You ain’t want no part of me then” (Wilson 73). He uses unhealthy coping strategies, such as sex and drinking, to build a facade of being a strong, whole man. But he has years of unhealed trauma that he suppressed until death, which not only affected his relationship with his family but with himself.

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Several different factors contribute to Troy's toxic masculinity, such as his relationship with his father, his blackness and his economic status. These aspects develop a character who has normalized aggression to express himself, and he fails to see how his behavior hurts him and his family. Wilson centers *Fences* around this character intending to highlight how societal narratives affect people on a smaller scale. The harmful standards that toxic masculinity imposes on men affect their relationships with their inner circle and themselves.

#### Work Cited

Wilson, August. *Fences: A Play*. Penguin Publishing Group, 1986.

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