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# Depression and Healing: An Analysis of the Duality of Space in August Wilson's *Fences*

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## Abstract

This paper employs Henri Lefebvre's theory of spatial production to analyze the duality of space—as both a source of trauma and a site of healing—in August Wilson's *Fences*. It argues that physical, ideological, and symbolic spaces within the play, particularly the workplace, the baseball field, and the fenced yard, are instrumental in shaping the intergenerational trauma experienced by the African American Maxson family in mid-20th-century America. The workplace and baseball field function as arenas of racial exclusion and structural oppression, epitomizing the systemic barriers that inflict profound psychological wounds on Troy Maxson, hindering his aspirations and perpetuating economic and social inequality. Conversely, the fenced yard evolves into a complex representational space. Initially embodying Troy's need for control and defense against external and internal threats, the fence gradually transforms into a space of potential healing. Facilitated by Rose Maxson's intervention, the yard becomes a locus for familial connection, reconciliation, and the challenging of transgenerational trauma. Cory's eventual participation in Troy's funeral, signified by the shared ritual of song, marks a crucial step towards breaking the cycle of inherited pain. The paper concludes that Wilson masterfully utilizes space, especially the fence's shifting symbolism, to demonstrate how environments of oppression can simultaneously harbor the potential for resilience, recovery, and the reclamation of identity and belonging within the African American experience, ultimately offering a vision of healing amidst historical trauma.

**Keywords:** Space, Trauma, Healing, Henri Lefebvre, Theory of Spatial Production

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## 1. Introduction

August Wilson's *Fences* (1985) offers a profound exploration of African American life in the mid-20th-century America. Set in Pittsburgh, the play centers on the Maxson family. Troy Maxson, a 53-year-old Black man, has sacrificed his youth and opportunities because of systemic racism. His wife, Rose Lee, a devout Christian, works to protect her family within the metaphorical and literal fences that shield them from external pressures. As Elam points out, *Fences* “form[s] a kind of fever chart of the trauma of slavery” (2007, p. 30). He captures the lingering and persistent nature of racial trauma that African Americans have inherited from the legacy of slavery and continued oppression. The play functions as a vivid representation of how the emotional, psychological, and social scars of slavery continue to affect the lives of Black Americans in the 20th century. The trauma in *Fences* is not just a personal one but a collective experience, passed down from generation to generation, ingrained in the very fabric of the Maxson family's existence.

Through the nuanced portrayal of Troy's battle against racial discrimination, the children's responses to intergenerational trauma, and Rose's efforts to reconstruct security and reunite the family, the play examines how African Americans experience spatial marginalization and the ensuing intergenerational trauma during the 1950s—a particular decade marked by efforts to dismantle racial segregation and discrimination in the civil rights movement. This paper therefore aims to explore the duality of space in the oppression and healing of African Americans, through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's theory of spatial production. Lefebvre's triadic dialectic provides a framework for analyzing the spatial oppression in August Wilson's *Fences*. This framework can be directly applied to the play's setting and themes. The first dimension, "Spatial Practice"—the physical organization of space (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 288), is embodied by the confined backyard, a physical manifestation of the limited opportunities available to the Maxson. The second, "Representations of Space"—conceptualized, planned space, aligns with the ideological space of pervasive racial segregation and discriminatory housing policies that dictate where the characters can live and work. Finally, "Representational Spaces"—the lived and symbolic space, is reflected in the spiritual and emotional realms, such as Troy's malformed concept of parenting and his rooted insecurities, which are themselves products of a lifetime of spatial constraint. Through this interplay, Wilson reveals how capitalist spatial production enacts structural oppression upon African American communities.

## 2. Space as the Origin of Trauma

In this play, the Maxson family, especially Troy Maxson, has directly experienced the racial discrimination, which has been bred by space. Space serves as both a physical and symbolic arena where Troy's plights unfold. To analyze this, Henri Lefebvre's framework is essential, particularly the distinction between "representations of space" and "spatial practice". "The former refers to the conceptualized spaces of planners, authorities, and powerholders; they are the dominant ideology embedded into the physical environment through design, law, and policy, as Lefebvre points out that representations of space "provided that the concept of ideology is not restricted, as it too often is, to the ideologies of the philosophers and of the ruling classes" (1991, p. 116). In *Fences*, the spaces inhabited by Troy—ranging from the workplace to baseball field—are not only arenas of contestation where race, power, and identity intersect, but also the conceptual and ideological order of racism.

Conversely, "spatial practice" refers to the "lived experience" (1991, p. 34) and daily routines that occur within these designed spaces; it is how individuals navigate and perceive the world imposed upon them. Generally speaking, the uneasy confrontations of Troy in the workplace as well as on the baseball field in *Fences* are clear representations of the harsh realities that African Americans confronted in the mid-20th century. In the workplace, Troy, like myriad black people in the real life, has been restricted with the nasty and marginal job as a garbage collector, while on the baseball field, instead of being famous for his talented baseball skills, Troy has been deprived of the possibility of becoming a professional baseball player because of the color of his skin. These places therefore symbolize the social spaces filled with racial discrimination and exclusion. Wilson paints a vivid portrait of how systematic racism operates, not just in the legal and institutional realms but in the very fabric of everyday life, shaping and limiting the possibilities of African American individuals through social spaces.

### 2.1. Working Space and Racial Discrimination

Spatial practice can be defined as "places — the relationship of local to global; the representation of that relationship; actions and signs; the trivialized spaces of everyday life" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 288). When it comes to August Wilson's *Fences*, spatial practice is mostly manifested by the physical spaces that Troy Maxson occupies, specifically the workplace and the baseball field. These spaces not only epitomize the origins of his personal struggles, but symbolize the structural forces of racial discrimination that limit his opportunities. These spaces are not merely physical locations but sites where broader structures of power, exclusion, and oppression are enacted. According to Lefebvre, spatial practice "embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (1991, p. 33). This points out that space is not a neutral product but a social one that reflects and reinforces the ideologies of the time. As a consequence, it captures the way in which Troy's relationship with the spaces he occupies is a direct manifestation of the systematic racial trauma he faces.

To be detailed, for one thing, Troy Maxson's experience in his workplace as a garbage collector is a powerful example of how spatial practices perpetuate racial discrimination and structural trauma. In this play, Troy is desperate for a promotion to truck driver, a job that favors white people. According to David Krasner, Troy represents the group of people who have been "[l]ured by the prospect of higher wages and opportunity for social betterment" (2007, p. 161). They bear the dream of living a better life. However, despite his years of experience and qualifications, Troy is denied the opportunity to move up because of his color. This denial, literally transcending the loss of an opportunity, is a symbolic representation of the racialized nature of social space, where African Americans are relegated to marginal roles in the workforce, regardless of their skills or qualifications. Troy's frustration with this denial is voiced in his roar: "You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck. That ain't no paper job! Hell, anybody can drive a truck" (Wilson, 1986, p. 2). Troy's anger is not only about his own failure but also about the biased social system that excludes black people from access to better working opportunities. The truck driver's position, in Troy's mind, is a symbol of upward mobility—of human rights. His inaccessibility to this space as well as this possibility represents the spatial boundaries imposed on Black people by racial discrimination.

Lefebvre's idea of spatial practice declares that the workplace is not just a neutral setting for labor but a social space where power dynamics are played out. In this space, the racial hierarchy that governs society is reproduced. While Troy believes he has the right to advance and improve his station in life, the space he occupies—his job, his relationship with his employer, and the larger societal context—dispossesses him of this basic human right. The workplace becomes a site of structural trauma,

where Troy's dreams of upward mobility are crushed by the weight of racial discrimination. This rejection is not just personal; it is a systematic reflection of the ways African Americans were kept in positions of subordination in the workforce; it limits their opportunities for advancement and perpetuates economic inequality.

However, just as Sauer points out that "all his characters are rebelling against their constrained circumstances and discrimination" (2007, p. 197). Troy manages to rise up against this unfair system and call for the better treatment by turning to the Union and he ends up becoming a truck driver as he wishes. Instead of focusing on enlarging the misery and failure of African Americans, August Wilson makes it possible for his character to be able to change his life. This arrangement is indeed the silver lining shining behind the cloud of racial discrimination and inequality. By making Troy capable of defending his dignity and right, Wilson declares the possibility of African American people's success of winning ultimate equality and respect.

## 2.2. *Baseball Field and White Hegemony*

Troy's experience with the baseball field leads to the manifestation of the larger racial trauma he endured. The baseball field is indeed a topos where the representations of space function. Lefebvre's theory positions the "representation of space" as one of three intertwined spatial dimensions (1991, p. 288). This dimension is the dominant mode of conceptualizing space, a product of technical knowledge wielded by architects, urbanists, and capitalists. It is, as he declares, intrinsically "tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose" (1991, p. 33). Therefore, it is far from an innocent plan; it is an ideological project that uses signs, codes, and knowledge to impose a specific social and economic order onto physical space, ultimately naturalizing the control inherent in that system. In *Fences*, the baseball field, which once represented Troy's dream of success and recognition in the world of professional sports, can be understood as a space of exclusion constructed and controlled by the white hegemony.

As a young man, Troy was a star player in the Negro Leagues. His talents can be seen through his proud description: "We had better pitching in the Negro leagues. I hit seven home runs off of Satchel Paige. You can't get no better than that!" (Wilson, 1986, p. 34). However, he was denied the opportunity to play in Major League Baseball because of his race. This experience of racial exclusion from the national pastime becomes a defining moment in Troy's life and a key source of the emotional and psychological trauma that he carries with him throughout the play. In truth, "the Negro Leagues began to die as soon as black players began to be accepted in numbers into professional baseball" (Timpane, 1994, p. 73). This further illustrates the fact that in the face of white hegemony, what matters is not talent or skill, but the inevitability that black baseball players can never steal the sound of the whites.

In *Fences*, Troy frequently reflects on his failed dreams of playing professional baseball, and the trauma of being excluded from the Major Leagues is one of the central sources of his bitterness and anger. Troy's memories of the baseball field are colored by the deep racial segregation of the time, as he was told that he was too old to play in the major leagues when they were finally ready to integrate. Troy's experience on the baseball field is an entire failure. The baseball field becomes Troy's "dying place and ultimately a kind of hallowed ground" (Koprince, 2006, p. 356). This points out the destructive influence of this failure. Rather than a heaven full of possibility, chance, dignity and hope, the baseball field from Troy's perspective becomes a graveyard full of loss and despair that denounces the death of his dream. As a noticeable space, the baseball field can be regarded as one of the fields loaded with racial exclusion of African Americans. This further explains that the trauma that Troy undergoes and the frustration and disappointment he endures, are not just personal torment but a reflection of the systematic racism. The baseball field, which should have been a space of opportunity, becomes a space of denial and exclusion, a constant reminder of the racial limitations imposed on him and the countless others. The death of Troy's dream on the baseball field surpasses a metaphorical death. It is an actual loss of future possibilities—one that would haunt him and his sons for the rest of his life.

August Wilson utilizes the spaces of the workplace and the baseball field in *Fences*, so as to illustrate the ways in which social spaces are deeply intertwined with racial discrimination and systemic oppression. These spaces are not neutral; they are imbued with the history of racial exclusion and the trauma it produces. This metaphorical usage of the space of baseball field enables Wilson to demonstrate how these spaces of exclusion bring forth traumas. For Troy, the impossibility of breaking through the racial barrier that kept him out of Major League Baseball is the wound that would never heal. The trauma of racial exclusion, particularly in the symbolic space of the baseball field, leaves a permanent scar on Troy's identity.

## 3. Space as the Remedy for Trauma

The duality of space in *Fences* refers to its ability of breeding as well as healing trauma. This means that apart from exerting traumatic influence on characters, space functions as a key role in protecting them from drowning into the abyss of trauma by exerting healing influence on their psychological landscapes and serving as the comfort to their internal struggles and the external forces. This refers to the spaces in which Troy Maxson and his family live, which, whether physical or symbolic, are deeply embedded with protection, expectation, and emotional connection.

Theoretically, Henri Lefebvre's concept of representational space, which refers to space as it is lived, symbolized, and imagined, provides an insightful framework for understanding how certain spaces—specifically the yard with or without fences in *Fences*—function as potential sites where traumas can be healed. This paper argues that in *Fences*, fence represents both symbols of protection and belonging, offering a pathway for the Maxson family to heal from past traumas.

### 3.1. *Yard as Protection*

Representational spaces are “redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, they have their source in history — in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 41). This illustrates the metaphorical function of space in having psychological and historical impacts on people. Henri Lefebvre’s notion speaks of the way space is lived through its associated images and symbols—how individuals engage with their environment emotionally and ideologically. He describes this space as a place where “the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (1991, p. 39), where it overlays physical space with symbolic significance. In *Fences*, the fenced yard that Troy builds can be regarded as a representation of his need for protection—not only from external forces but also from his internal emotional turmoil. In detail, the fence is Troy’s response to the historical trauma of personal failure—from a baseball player to a garbage collector; from a lovable husband to a cheater; from a responsible father to an abuser. “Motivated by love and the desire to secure an enduring legacy for his family” (Ogoanah, 2013, p. 234), Troy is building the fence to create a space of control in a world where he feels constantly denied.

Initially, Troy has been delaying the process of building fences out of his love affairs, because of which he cannot spare enough energy or time. Ironically, it is this love affair that finally urges him to finish the construction. It was when Alberta died of child delivery that Troy realized the weakness and crippledness of himself while in face of ruthless fate. Before Alberta’s death, Troy has been proud of his battle against devil, where he manages to beat devil for several times. However, devil denounces his power through Alberta’s death, laughing at Troy’s absurd arrogance and further stimulating Troy’s strong sense of insecurity. Devil can be understood and purely the god of death. It can also be understood as the present social structure within which black people have been marginalized and left to death, whether in terms of job or life. Out of fear and insecurity, Troy shouts,

“I’m gonna take and build me a fence around this yard. See? I’m gonna build me a fence around what belongs to me. And then I want you to stay on the other side. See? You stay over there until you’re ready for me. Then you come on.” (Wilson, 1986, p. 77)

It can be inferred that the fence becomes a symbol of emotional defense—a space where Troy can assert control over his own life and shield his family from the pain of loss, grief, and racial exclusion. His words suggest a deep emotional and psychological need to carve out a space of ownership and security, a place where he can protect himself from the social forces of racial discrimination that has continuously marginalized him. Lefebvre’s idea that representational space is tied to the relations of production and the social order they impose is critical here. The racialized power structures that define Troy’s world are reflected in his relationship with space.

In the context of racial segregation, where African Americans were systematically excluded from opportunities for social mobility, the fence becomes Troy’s way of asserting “property rights”—not just over the physical yard but over his emotional and psychological well-being. As Nadel points out, “a fence... implies an owner who is human and is manifesting his or her rightful claim” (1994, p. 87). For Troy, the meaning of fence has gone beyond physical length. It is a symbol of his rightful place in a world that has continually excluded him. It represents his claim to identity and belonging in a society that has sought to marginalize him. To conclude, the fence, the most important physical and metaphorical figure in this play symbolizes not only a physical boundary but also an emotional defense. It is Cory’s subconscious refuge and his symbolic resistance against the ‘devil’—a metaphor for the social structures that have deprived him of opportunity, dignity, family stability, and freedom.

### 3.2. *Yard as Connection*

While Troy’s initial impulse in building the fence is rooted in protection, the fence’s emotional and symbolic meaning evolves throughout the play, transforming into a site of belonging. It transforms its role as physical and emotional boundaries into a connection, through which generations of African Americans, fathers and sons, happiness and hatred, past and present can be linked. As Lefebvre demonstrates, “representational space is alive: it speaks” (1991, p. 42). This means representational space is the tool through which invisible things can be delivered, such as the ideology, feelings, and emotions. In *Fences*, the yard armed with fences has been blessed with different meanings by different people. During the “reign” of Troy, either the yard or the fence speaks fear, insecurity and inferiority. It has been associated with a strong sense of resistance towards miserable past sufferings as well as the sense of confusion towards the unexpected external world which has exerted harmful influence on this family. However, Rose and Cory manage to change this unstable space into a lovable symbol of family connection by healing the past traumas within it.

At the end of the play, the entire Maxson family has gathered in the backyard with solid fence, including Cory, who has been banished by Troy. Initially, this reunion seems a bit awkward because either Lyons, Troy’s first son, or Cory, Troy’s second son, has uncomfortable memories of Troy. Cory, in particular, is unwilling to attend Troy’s funeral out of complex feelings. “I can’t drag Papa with me everywhere I go. I’ve got to say no to him” (Wilson, 1986, p. 96). This outburst inner thought reveals the huge influence Troy has exerted on Cory, which is so heavy and uneasy that Cory is eager to get rid of. Cory’s refusal to the funeral symbolizes his attempt to cut off his relationship with this family. The fence can keep his body from being hurt within the yard, but cannot keep his heart from being broken by past memories. This is when Rose shows up and manages to mend the loopholes on Cory’s mental fence. Her pivotal intervention begins with a simple but profound truth: “You can’t be nobody but who you are, Cory” (Wilson, 1986, p. 97). This points out that despite the scars Troy left on Cory, Cory is able to decide which kind of person he wants to become. She argues that refusing to attend the funeral would not free him but would instead trap him in the same cycle of transgenerational hatred that defined Troy, essentially ensuring he would become his father. To break this cycle, she implies, he must first confront and acknowledge his past, not run from it.

Rose's intervention becomes pivotal in reshaping Cory's perspective, not only on Troy but on the entire Maxson family. She gently guides him towards a place of reconciliation. This lesson in reconciliation is then poignantly embodied in the ritual of singing the song "Old Blue," a melody passed down from Troy's father. When Cory joins his half-sister Raynell in singing the line, "I'm gonna tell you this to let you know. Blue's gone where the good dogs go" (Wilson, 1986, p. 97), he is not merely mourning a dog; he is participating in a family ritual that acknowledges Troy's death and their shared history. The change of Cory's idea from rejecting his father into facing his father by agreeing to attend his funeral can be seen from this act of singing which symbolizes the restoration of familial bonds and the breaking of the cycle of trauma that has haunted the Maxson family. To be specific, whereas Troy, haunted by his fear and hatred towards his father, Cory has the opportunity and courage, which is based on the support and love from mother, to jump out of this hatred-circle and therefore be able to heal the transgenerational trauma.

In conclusion, August Wilson uses space—specifically the fence—as a vivid example to explore the balance of trauma and healing in African American family, helping the world to "accept an African world view" (Shannon, 2009, p. 24). The fence, as a metaphorical figure space, serves not only as a barrier to external forces but also as a space where the Maxson family confronts their emotional pain, reclaims their identity, and finds belonging. The transformation of the fence from a site of protection and control to a space of family power and belonging exemplifies how representational space can serve as a remedy for trauma via providing a foundation for healing and renewal. By reclaiming the fence, the Maxson family reasserts their humanity, family strength, and cultural continuity and therefore illustrates the profound healing potential of space. Noticeably, this play ends with Gabe's dace, which is "a slow, strange dance, eerie and life-giving. A dance of atavistic signature and ritual" (Wilson, 1986, p. 101). This ritual dance can be regarded as a purification ceremony where the innocent Gabe welcomes Troy into Heaven and blesses the witnesses with comfort and hope. With Troy going to Heaven, Rose embracing Raynell, Lyons enjoying music, Cory forgiving past traumas, the miserable and uneasy memories of past have been washed and a new life for this family will begin in this renewed home anchored by the solid fence that now unites the family.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *Fences*, August Wilson intricately examines the relationship between people and space, revealing the struggles of the Maxson family. The spaces in their lives—whether it be the workplace, the baseball field, or their backyard enclosed by a fence—serve as significant symbols, embodying the harsh realities African Americans faced in mid-20th-century America. These spaces go far beyond the geographical limitations and become metaphorical symbols which reflect the ongoing social and cultural challenges influencing African Americans' lived experiences. These spaces not only reflect the collapse of the American Dream—the notion that everyone regardless of background, race, origin, can achieve success, but also symbolize the enduring effects of racial discrimination, where African Americans are continually excluded from opportunities and subjected to self-hate as a result of systematic racism. The workplace, for instance, where Troy Maxson endures the turmoil of racial injustice, becomes a microcosm of the larger social forces that keep African Americans from realizing aspirations. Similarly, the baseball field, a space that once carries Troy's expectations, now stands as a reminder of the injustice imposed upon him. Finally, the backyard, enclosed by a fence, becomes a poignant representation of confinement, isolation, and emotional detachment, capturing the fracturing of the Maxson family's dreams and aspirations.

However, instead of merely depicting a miserable kaleidoscope of frustration, August Wilson offers a hopeful vision through the dynamic function of space. The yard and fences, which initially were constructed to control the family, take on a new meaning over time. The divisive, isolating structure gradually transforms from a symbol of emotional separation into one of healing for Rose and Cory as they digest their miseries. While Troy remains resistant to change, holding on to the fence as a symbol of his final defense, Rose and Cory start to reshape their relationship with space. Rose, in particular, views the fence as a way to bring the family together, to create a sense of continuity in a world that constantly seeks to tear them apart. As a result, the fence evolves from a physical barrier into a metaphorical space where healing, reconciliation, and a new understanding of family can occur. This shift in the meaning of the space reveals how spaces, can change over time, transforming from places of division and isolation into sites of healing where emotional wounds can be healed. The way the Maxson family reconstructs the meaning of the yard and the fence parallels their own emotional journeys as they work through the pain of their past.

These spaces play a vital role in the life of African Americans, especially in the context of the Maxson family's struggle. As they finish building the yard and reconstruct the meaning of it, they are able to reclaim a sense of identity and family, transcending both the spatial and emotional restrictions that past traumas and present realities have imposed upon them. Wilson's portrayal of the combination of several spaces—the workplace, the baseball field, and the backyard—underscores the notion that, while racial trauma exerts frustrative influence on people through spaces, spaces can also serve as sites for resilience and recovery as long as people are able to understand the role of space from a brighter perspective. By confronting the limitations imposed on them and redefining the spaces they occupy, the Maxson family embody the potential for transformation and growth, suggesting that the power to heal and reclaim one's dignity lies not only in escaping these spaces but in redefining and reinterpreting them.

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