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Father-Son Conflict and the American Dream in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and August Wilson's *Fences*

Ama Wattley

> [I]t is nearly impossible to avoid one reading of *Fences* as a deliberate point-to-point signifyin(g) parody of *Death of a Salesman*.
>
> —Mark Rocha

> The artistic ancestry of *Fences* is at least as much Euro-American as African, for the play's blues sensibilities (themselves an American invention) are figured in a text which displays its creator's obvious mastery of conventional Euro-American theatrical structure, pace, and methodology. Furthermore, its narrative events, particularly its exploration of family dynamics, appear—at least to me—intended self-consciously to recall, in particular, Arthur Miller's classic mid-twentieth century American drama, *Death of a Salesman*.
>
> —Michael Awkward

Although August Wilson claimed never to have read Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*[1] and did not count Miller as a playwriting influence, his play *Fences* contains a number of similarities to Arthur Miller's classic play,[2] as critics Mark Rocha and Michael Awkward note above. In an attempt to explain the uncanny parallels between the two plays, both Rocha and Awkward interpret Wilson's statement that he has not read *Death of a Salesman* figuratively rather than literally. While Awkward suggests that *Fences's* resemblance to Miller's play is deliberate and intentional, Rocha explains the resemblance in terms of "signifying"—a form of black vernacular speech, or more specifically "facing," which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines as "that by which you intend to confine (or define) me I shall

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return to you squarely in your face" (qtd in Rocha 5). Thus, Rocha suggests that Wilson is "repeat[ing] and revis[ing] the work of literary antecedents, which in Wilson's case means 'getting in the face' of the American triumvirate of O'Neill, Miller, and Williams" (5). As Sandra G. Shannon interprets Rocha's explanation, *Fences* "can be understood as an effort to place the African American experience on the same ground as that occupied by the more dominant culture. . . . *Fences* makes a strong case for elevating the African-American experience to a grand scale and for erasing the so-called color line long enough to make Troy Maxson's misfortune and pain more than simply one black man's predicament" (85). Like Shannon, Rocha, and Awkward, my discussion of how the American dream impacts the father-son conflict in *Fences* and *Death of a Salesman* points out the way in which Wilson "riffs" Miller's play, and seeks to answer two of the questions Shannon asks in her study of *Fences:* "What does a simultaneous examination of these plays reveal about how Troy Maxson and Willie Loman deal with their respective dilemmas?" and "Does such a comparison demonstrate that one culture is any more immune from society's backlash? (85)

> There are two versions of the American dream. The historical American dream is the promise of a land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all. This dream needs no challenge, only fulfillment. But since the Civil War, and particularly since 1900, the American dream has become distorted to the dream of business success . . . The original premise of our dream of success . . . was that enterprise, courage, and hard work were the keys to success. Since the end of the First World War, this too has changed. Instead of the ideals of hard work and courage, we have salesmanship. Salesmanship implies a certain element of fraud: the ability to put over or sell a commodity regardless of its intrinsic usefulness. The goal of salesmanship is to make a deal, to earn a profit—the accumulation of profit being an unquestioned end in itself. (Clurman 132)

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman has come to accept the latter version of the American dream that Harold Clurman observes in the epigraph above. His philosophy for material success is based

upon it, and he eagerly instills these ideas in his two sons, Biff and Happy. Troy Maxson, the protagonist in August Wilson's *Fences*, on the other hand, finds the first version of the American dream—"the promise of a land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all"—to be false when he finds himself shut out of an opportunity to excel and fulfill his aspirations due to racial discrimination. As a result, he directs his son away from the dream of success and toward the pragmatism of surviving and coping in a racist society. Willy and Troy's contrasting beliefs about their ability to attain the American dream, beliefs which reside in their differing racial identities, play a large role in how they relate to their sons and what they instill in them. Willy's effusive pride, affection, leniency, and moral laxity contrast with Troy's emotional distance, dominance, strict discipline, and bullying. Yet despite their different parental styles and beliefs, both men end up directly or indirectly sabotaging their sons' future and creating ambivalent relationships with them as a result.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's beliefs about how to succeed in the business world are characterized by his philosophy that "the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want" (21). As Thomas E. Porter asserts, Willy's "adherence to the cult of personality, of being 'well liked,' is a reflection of his identity; before he can sell anything and if he can sell nothing else, he must sell himself, his own personality. He has been shaped by a society that believed steadily and optimistically in the myth of success, and he has become the agent and the representative of that society" (29). Although in his moments of clarity Willy admits that he has failed in his ability to meet the standards of his adopted philosophy ("I don't know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I'm not noticed" [23]; "I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again, that I won't make a living for you, or a business for the boys" [25]), he continues to doggedly believe in them, if no longer for himself, then for his sons Happy, and especially Biff.

In the flashback scenes in *Death of a Salesman*, the relationship between Willy and his two sons is seen to be one of mutual admiration and idealization. Willy is extremely proud of his sons' athletic prowess and popularity. He is particularly fond of his older son Biff, his favorite, who is a star on the high school football team, has three scholarship offers to college, and is a leader among his

peers. Because his sons show all the signs of conforming to the values Willy believes are necessary to succeed in life—namely, attractiveness and popularity—he is confident that their futures will be bright, and he essentially lives vicariously through Biff, believing his son will achieve all that he never did in his life. Likewise, Willy's sons are just as admiring of their father, albeit based on Willy's boastful bravado and deceitful reports about his work. Both Biff and Happy falsely believe their father is a successful traveling salesman who is regarded with respect and importance by his clients wherever he goes in the New England area where he works. They long to travel with him on his sales calls in order to see the "master salesman" at work, and, hoping to achieve what they believe is their father's celebrated status, they seek to impress him with their own achievements.

Willy revels in his boys' worship of him, especially since his ego and confidence are constantly diminished on his job, where, in truth, he is far from the popular salesman he boasts of being to his sons, and at home, he is having trouble paying off his debts. In his desire to remain the apple of his sons' eyes, Willy often acts as their pal or friend rather than as a paternal figure. Instead of providing discipline and instilling right moral values in his sons, Willy sometimes encourages, condones, and defends wrong actions by his sons, most notably Biff's propensity for stealing. Rather than condemning Biff's thievery or using it as a teachable moment to instill integrity and honesty in Biff, Willy suggests that Biff's thefts show initiative and daring, and thus attempts to condone them. He even encourages the boys to steal some lumber in order to impress his brother Ben by showing him that his sons are fearless. Moreover, Willy's sanctioning of immoral behavior is also seen when Biff fails his math exam and Willy chastises Bernard for not supplying Biff with the answers.

In contrast to the relaxed, lenient, and affectionate relationship Willy enjoys with his sons, Troy Maxson in *Fences* establishes his dominance and authority as head of the household and family provider. While Willy's favorite advice to his sons focuses on his optimism for their future resulting from their attractiveness and popularity, Troy's favorite piece of advice is more focused on realism. He states that "You've got to take the crookeds with the straights" (37), which means that one has to be ready to endure both the hardships and triumphs, the bad and the good in life, in equal

measure. His interaction with his younger son Cory is based around this philosophy.[3] He makes certain Cory maintains his job at the A&P and successfully completes his chores around the house before engaging in recreational activities. If Troy finds Cory to be lacking in any of these areas, he is quick to punish him. He makes it clear that he is the financial provider in the family, and so what he says goes. To this end, Troy demands respect and discipline from his son Cory and attempts to teach him fiscal responsibility and the benefits of delayed gratification. For example, when Cory asks why his father does not purchase a television set, Troy gruffly explains that his money must be used for more important things like repairing the roof and paying the bills. Troy wants to teach Cory to prioritize, and to distinguish the necessities from the luxuries of life. Moreover, in finally offering to put in one hundred dollars towards a television set if Cory will earn the remaining funds, Troy wants to teach Cory the value of self-sufficiency, of working to buy what he desires, not merely depending upon his father to get it for him.

Despite the good values Troy attempts to instill in Cory, he lacks the emotional effervescence and verbal expressions of love we see Willy display toward his sons. If Willy goes too far overboard in praising his sons' attributes, then Troy does not go far enough. The harsh manner in which he communicates with Cory causes Cory to fear him and seek to subtly rebel against the iron fist with which Troy rules the roost. Cory feels stifled by Troy's demands and often procrastinates in completing the chores he knows are his to do. Moreover, Cory feels unsure of Troy's affection and questions whether his father actually likes him. Rather than reassure the boy that he does, Troy instead lectures him about his paternal responsibility to provide for Cory's material needs, but not his emotional ones:

> TROY: A man got to take care of his family. . . . [I]t's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you! Let's get this straight right here. . . before it go along any further. . . I ain't got to like you. Mr. Rand don't give me my money come payday cause he likes me. He gives me cause he owe me. I done give you everything I had to give you. I gave you your life! . . . And liking your black ass wasn't part of the bargain. Don't you try and go through life worrying about if somebody like you or not.

> You best be making sure they doing right by you. You understand what I'm saying, boy?
> CORY: Yessir.
> TROY: Then get the hell out of my face, and get on down to that A&P. (38)

As Alan Nadel points out, "the problem of *[Fences]* can be seen as Troy's attempt to take measure of himself in a world that has denied him the external referents" (91). Troy's words in this passage show that he takes pride in his role as provider for his son and his wife. He takes his responsibilities and duties to his family seriously, more so it seems, than he does his job as sanitation worker where, although he fights to be allowed to drive the trucks like the white workers rather than haul the garbage, he does not worry about not having the requisite driver's license to legally drive the truck. In essence, his family roles are the only ones Troy feels a sense of dignity and pride about in a society that has not allowed him to reach his full potential in the public world of work.

Moreover, Troy's words of advice to Cory provide a direct contrast to Willy's in *Death of a Salesman.* While Willy not only expresses his affinity for his sons, he also believes it is their greatest asset that they are well-liked by others. He places greater emphasis on this quality than on hard work. Troy, on the other hand, denounces Willy's philosophy of likeability. Quite clearly in a society and at a time when African Americans were despised and treated with contempt merely because of the color of their skin, Willy's philosophy of being well-liked would be an extremely difficult standard for a black man or woman to achieve. Hence, Troy believes that worrying about whether someone likes you is futile and irrelevant; it is more important to be concerned with whether they are *treating* you right. Troy knows the world to be a hostile, racist, and unwelcoming place for black people, and he attempts to prepare Cory for such a world by behaving toward his son without tenderness or softness, as he will be treated in society.[4]

Interestingly, while Willy desires his sons to be like him, or more accurately, like the image of himself he projects to them, Troy does not want his son to follow in his footsteps or experience the kind of life he has undergone. He tells his wife Rose: "I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. You the only decent thing

that ever happened to me. I wish him that. But I don't wish him a thing else from my life" (39). Born the son of a sharecropper, Troy saw his father struggle to get out of debt to the white tenant farmer for whom he worked, and became part of his father's exploited labor force, since he put his eleven children to work as soon as they were able. After a huge physical confrontation with his father, Troy left home and made his way North, hoping to find work. What he finds instead is a large number of African Americans seeking the same thing and living in poverty and depressed conditions:

> TROY: I walked on down to Mobile and hitched up with some of them fellows that was heading this way. Got up here and found out. . . not only couldn't you get a job. . . you couldn't find no place to live. I thought I was in freedom. Shhh. Colored folks living down there on the riverbanks in whatever kind of shelter they could find for themselves. Right down there under the Brady Street Bridge. Living in shacks made of sticks and tarpaper. Messed around there and went from bad to worse. (54)

As Wilson writes in the prologue of the play, the disparity between what European immigrants could attain and what African Americans could attain was starkly different. The opportunities presented to European immigrants were more numerous than those presented to African Americans, and as a result they opened businesses, prospered, and realized the American dream, while African Americans with similar dreams and eagerness were rejected, and had to satisfy themselves with the ability to "breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon" (i).

For Troy, rejection comes in the sports arena. As a way to feed himself, he becomes a robber and ends up in jail after killing a man. It is in jail that Troy finds his calling when he takes up baseball and finds he excels in it. Upon leaving prison after fifteen years, Troy joins the Negro Leagues, but his dream of joining the Major Leagues is denied him due to racism and discrimination; black players were prohibited from joining the Majors during the time Troy was playing. This denial of his dream continues to haunt Troy and leaves him bitter because by the time black players were allowed in the Majors, Troy was past his prime. Hence, instead of finding the fame and fortune to which his talents should have given him access according

to the myth of the American dream, Troy ends up working in obscurity as a garbage collector. Although he has purchased a home, he is only able to pay for it through the government compensation he receives for housing his disabled brother Gabriel, a war veteran. Now Troy spends his time denigrating the players, both white and black, who play in the Majors and boasting of his exceeding talent which he was never able to showcase in the most celebrated league.

In Troy's mind, times have not changed very much in the present from how they were in years past, despite some visible signs around him. Because of the racism Troy experienced in his sports-playing days, he does not have the optimistic attitude about Cory's future that Willy has about Biff's. Hence, when Cory wants to join the high school football team, Troy is firmly against it. He does not want Cory to have anything to do with the sports world that denied him access to its ranks. It does not matter that Cory is not interested in sports as a career, but merely as a means to earn a scholarship to college. Troy is convinced that little has changed and he cannot fathom that Cory might have a shot to be more than he was. Therefore, he insists that Cory keep his job at the A&P, despite the fact that it will interfere with football practice and Cory has already shown the initiative to negotiate with the store manager so that he will be able to resume his job after the football season. Essentially, Troy's vision for Cory's life in terms of careers is limited. He envisions Cory working as a mechanic, as a construction worker, or in some other skilled trade when Cory has set his sights higher. As Troy sees it, such trades will give Cory skills that "can't nobody take away from [him]" (35). It is clear, then, that Troy's behavior and thought process in regard to Cory is governed by the limitations and constraints he has faced in his own life as a black man, and which he is certain Cory will also experience. Although Troy accuses his wife Rose of "mothering" Cory too much (39) and insists that Cory "got to make his own way," (39) in the world, it appears that it is he, more than Rose, who attempts to stifle Cory by discouraging his ambitions and goals.

Conversely, Willy Loman cannot think of anything that can hinder his sons from making successes of their lives—especially nothing outside themselves. He tells Biff and Happy that if they are determined to succeed, "the world is an oyster. . ." (28). Essentially, there is nothing that can stop them. Like Troy, though, his belief

about what kind of career will lead to success for his sons is limited. To Willy, only success in business or sales equals an achievement. The kind of mechanical or construction work that Troy wants to steer Cory to is, in Willy's eyes, unacceptable for his sons. Critic Irving Jacobson observes that: "Because [Willy] habitually deflects consciousness of his own failure by focusing attention on his sons, [he] cannot accept Biff's way of life in the West on its own terms but tries to reabsorb him into a business-oriented culture" (49). Therefore, when Biff expresses the opinion that the family should be "mixing cement on some open plain, or . . . . [working as] . . .carpenters" (44), Willy's response is: "Even your grandfather was better than a carpenter" (44). Interestingly, though, what compels Troy to steer Cory to such trades—the desire to have something no one can take away—is what Willy lacks in his work as a salesman where he is dependent on the whims of the public and his employer for his living and his self-esteem. Irving Jacobson points out, for example, that "because Loman needs gratification to take a social form, his life is crushed by indifference, criticism, rejection, and abandonment" (47). This is nowhere more prominent than in the scene in Howard Wagner's office when Willy, requesting a change in job location, finds himself summarily dismissed, and attempts to negotiate an increasingly lower salary for himself. The picture of Willy at this moment is that of a pathetic and desperate man who has lost all dignity and self-esteem.

However, Willy's failure to achieve material success stems from his own choices rather than from denial of opportunity or access as Troy finds. For one, unlike Troy's family, which was steeped in poverty and debt, Willy comes from a family of successful, self-reliant businessmen who have achieved the American dream. Although Willy was young when his father left, he knows that he made and sold flutes successfully. Even more successful is his brother Ben, a father-figure to Willy, who made a fortune in Africa through his ruthless business ventures. Willy, though, makes the decision to work for others rather than for himself, and passes up an opportunity to go to Alaska with Ben to amass wealth, a decision he later regrets. However, despite the fact that Willy has not followed successfully in his father and brother's footsteps, he continues to believe in the American dream—both the idea of opportunity/ equality and business success—because he has seen it become a reality in the lives of those close to him. Thus, he believes it can

happen to his sons as well. So rather than discouraging Biff from playing football and encouraging him to concentrate on his school work, instead, as Troy does with Cory in *Fences,* Willy encourages and revels in Biff's local stardom and believes it to be one sign of Biff's greatness and potential to be a success in life.

Nevertheless, despite Willy's belief in his sons' greatness, both turn out to be disappointments, even failures, in their adult lives, and in many ways, this can be traced to the false values and beliefs Willy instills in them. Biff continues to have a problem with stealing, a practice Willy condoned in his youth, and has "stole[n] [him]self out of every good job since high school!" (105). Both Biff and Happy also find it difficult to submit to authority after having had their egos inflated so much by Willy when they were teenagers. As Biff tells it, Willy has "[blown] [him] so full of hot air [he] could never stand taking orders from anybody" (105). Furthermore, both Biff and Happy have internalized their father's belief that being a salesman or businessman is the only path to success and achievement. As a result, Biff often suppresses his real love of working outdoors with his hands because he does not believe such work constitutes an achievement or ambition. Hence, he drifts restlessly from one job to the next, still with no financial stability at the age of thirty-five. Interestingly, Willy too is much more skilled at building things than he is at selling, yet he never sees this as a viable option for himself, so ingrained is the notion of equating material success with business. And although Happy has attained some of the trappings of success like an apartment and a car, he too feels a sense of restlessness in his job as a clerk, often seeing it as a game and not being satisfied with his work. Hence, the values Willy instilled in his sons, as well as his treatment of them, has had a detrimental effect on them in their adulthood.

Throughout the scenes taking place in the present, therefore, Willy vacillates between confusion, anger, and hope about his sons and what they have made of their lives. He expresses confusion as to why Biff, who exhibited so much potential in his youth, has not amounted to anything and cannot seem to find himself at thirty-five years of age. Willy sometimes angrily declares Biff a "bum" only to quickly contradict himself by declaring Biff's greatness and expressing continued hope that Biff can still achieve greatness if he puts his mind to it. Moreover, he shouts to both his sons that "the

woods are burning," a phrase that means time is running out for them to make a success out of their lives, and therefore, vindicate his own. In *Fences*, Troy sabotages Cory's future more directly and deliberately but under the pretense of doing the right thing. When Cory defies his father's authority by lying to him about reclaiming his job at the A&P, all the while continuing to go to football practice, Troy takes matters into his own hands by seeing Cory's coach to have Cory taken off the team. With these actions, Troy ruins Cory's chance to be recruited and get a scholarship to college; therefore, he sabotages Cory's future. In Troy's actions, competing motives can be seen. For one, Troy wishes to punish Cory's act of disobedience; second, he desires to protect Cory from what he experienced in the sports world. As he states to his wife Rose: "I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports" (39). So while Willy Loman is elated and proud of Biff for being the star of his high school football team, and would do anything to have Biff maintain this status, Troy rejects football (and all sports), as options for Cory to pursue, thereby limiting rather than expanding his opportunities. Hence, while Willy ends up indirectly hurting his sons' chances to succeed by passing on to them false, superficial values that do not equip them to face the real world, Troy deliberately cuts off what Cory describes as his "only chance" with his heavy-handed actions.

The result of this direct and indirect sabotage inflicted upon the sons by their fathers is a strained relationship between them. In *Fences*, the tension already underlying the relationship between Troy and Cory due to Troy's gruff manner is brought to a head when Troy takes action to prevent Cory from playing football. It begins with a verbal confrontation that ends Act I whereby Cory declares Troy "scared I'm gonna be better than you..." (58) as the reason he won't allow Cory to play football. As Cory's resentment toward his father builds, verbal confrontation turns into physical combat. When Cory walks in on Troy and his mother Rose arguing heatedly about Troy's adulterous affair and impending fatherhood and sees Troy grab his mother's arm in an aggressive manner, he "comes up behind Troy and grabs him. Troy, surprised, is thrown off balance just as Cory throws a glancing blow that catches him on the chest and knocks him down" (72). Both father and son are "stunned" by Cory's strength and Troy's fall. Troy is stopped from retaliating by Rose, who holds him back.

The final confrontation between Cory and Troy occurs when Troy has by now alienated his whole family as a result of his sexual affair. Already angry and bitter toward Troy, Cory has also lost respect for him for being unfaithful to his mother and bringing his child from the affair into the house for Rose to rear. As a result, Cory feels emboldened to disrespect Troy's authority by refusing the courtesy of saying "excuse me" to his father when he wants to get by him into the house. As Cory tells Troy, "I ain't got to say excuse me to you . You don't count around here no more" (85). This statement leads to a diatribe from Troy whereby he attempts to verbally re-assert his authority and dominance by reminding Cory whose house he is living in: "All of a sudden you done got so grown that your daddy don't count around here no more. . . Around here in his own house and yard that he done paid for with the sweat of his brow. You done got so grown to where you gonna take over. You gonna take over my house. Is that right?" (85). This leads to another physical altercation whereby Cory takes up Troy's bat and swings at him twice, but misses. The two "struggle over the bat. . . Troy ultimately is the stronger, and takes the bat from Cory and stands over him ready to swing. He stops himself" (88). In this scene, Cory has "struck out," using the baseball idiom Troy has used to characterize each of Cory's transgressions. Troy had given him three chances to strike out, and on this last occasion, Cory does so. Consequently, Troy banishes Cory from the home and from his life. Sadly, this is the last interaction between father and son; Troy dies eight years later without having reunited with Cory, who joins the military in the intervening years. Thus, their combative father-son relationship mirrors the one Troy had with his own father with whom he also engaged in a physical battle and then left home afterward.

Like Cory in *Fences*, we discover that Biff has also been thrown out of his father's home. Unlike Cory, however, who returns home after his father's death, Biff has the chance to confront Willy before his death, as an adult male in a tension-filled reunion that ends in an emotional verbal confrontation. In both plays, adultery casts its shadow on the father-son relationship. In *Death of a Salesman*, the strong father-son bond that existed between Willy and Biff in the flashback scenes disintegrates upon Biff's discovery of his father's adultery while still a teenager. Having gone to Boston to see Willy after failing math, in the hopes that Willy will talk to his teacher and

he can graduate, Biff finds Willy in his hotel room with a woman. It is at this point that Biff's idealization of his father ends and turns to a sense of betrayal and resentment. He now views his father as a fake. He leaves Boston, it seems, with a desire to move as far away from his father's dreams for him as he can. Hence, rather than continuing to strive for greatness and success, Biff gives up on himself and on making something of his life, beginning with his refusal to go to summer school to retake the math course he failed. The discovery of the adultery, therefore, plays as much of a role in Biff's demise as the superficial values Willy has instilled in him. As readers, we don't know what Biff's future might have been had he not discovered the affair, and many critics have looked at this aspect of the plot as undermining Miller's critique of the American dream.

That Biff continues to resent Willy because of his affair is evident in the scenes occurring in the present when Biff is an adult. He never revealed Willy's affair to his unsuspecting mother, Linda, but several times during the play, he subtly hints at the night he found Willy in the hotel room with Miss Francis, such as when he says sarcastically to Willy, "Since when did you get so clean?" (46) in response to Willy's demand that Biff not curse in his house. Also, in trying to explain to Linda the deteriorating relationship between himself and his father that led Willy to throw him out the house, Biff announces that "I know he's a fake and he doesn't like anybody around who knows!" (42). When Linda questions Biff about the meaning of this statement, Biff evasively declares "Just don't lay it all at my feet. . . It's between me and him—that's all I have to say" (42). In addition, when Linda makes the statement that "It seems there's a woman" (42), Biff asks sharply "What woman?," believing his mother is speaking of Miss Francis when in fact she is merely referring to a female driver who witnessed Willy deliberately smash his car. Finally, Biff becomes very protective of Linda, demanding that Willy not yell at her or angrily declaring that Willy has "always wiped the floor with [Linda]. Never had an ounce of respect for [her]" (40). When Happy protests, Biff asks him: "What the hell do you know about it?" (40). Moreover, as he overhears Willy downstairs talking to himself, Biff is disturbed and agitated that Willy is doing so "[w]ith [Linda] in the house" (15). Even though Willy's murmurings are harmless reminiscences of the better times he has shared with Biff, Biff seems to think Willy is murmuring about the woman in the hotel, as he continuously and angrily declares

"Mom's hearing that!" (15). Hence, Biff is still very much affected by Willy's act of adultery despite the years that have passed since its occurrence, and he continues to see Willy as lacking in character and integrity; he continues in his disillusionment of Willy.

In essence, it is the affair that exposes Willy as a fake in Biff's eyes and causes him to reject and rebel against Willy's values. Yet the relationship between father and son is ambivalent. Underlying Biff's resentment of his father is a continued desire to please him. For example, he asks Happy early in the play why Willy is always mocking him, saying "Everything I say there's a twist of mockery on his face. I can't get near him" (10). This statement suggests a longing to re-establish intimacy with Willy, despite the resentment he also feels. Moreover, Biff's return home causes him to once again become lulled into Willy's grandiose way of seeing him. He begins to believe that he can contact a former employer, Bill Oliver, whom he recalls was very fond of him and use his old charm to convince him to support a plan of his and Happy's of opening a sporting goods store. It is not until he sees his former employer and discovers that Bill Oliver does not remember him at all, that Biff starts to realize the truth about himself and Willy. He tells Willy in desperation: "I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. . . I'm not bringing home any prizes anymore, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!" (106). Hence, Biff begins to show signs of growth that Willy never attains. Instead, seeing Biff's tears cause Willy to become even more convinced of Biff's greatness and potential, and he carries out his suicide plan in the belief that the insurance money he leaves behind will help Biff to be magnificent and come out ahead in life.

Such ambivalence is also apparent in Cory's attitude toward his father, though on a lesser scale. At the beginning of Act II.i., after Troy has made sure that Cory cannot play football, Cory is seen hitting a baseball with a bat, trying to "mimic Troy" in his swing (59). Hence, even in his anger at Troy, Cory attempts to model his father. Moreover, Rose tells Troy, earlier, that "Everything that boy do . . . he do for you. He wants you to say 'Good job, son.' That's all" (39). As with Biff, then, Cory exhibits feelings of both love and hatred toward his father.

Death of a Salesman and *Fences* both end with the deaths of the fathers and the last scenes take place on the day of the funeral. In

Miller's play, Willy's failure to live up to his own values of popularity and likeability which he instilled in his sons is starkly evident. His dream of having a funeral attended by hundreds of people from miles around, in the manner of Dave Singleton, the salesman whose life and death Willy admired, does not come true. Neither does the belief that such a large funeral will redeem him in the eyes of his son as he tells Ben in one of his hallucinations. Only Willy's wife, his two sons, his neighbor Charley, and his neighbor's son Bernard are present at the funeral. Of the three family members, only Biff shows continued signs of growth and understanding. He comes to realize that Willy constantly sought to excel at something at which he was not very talented, while denigrating or rejecting that at which he was good. Sadly, Happy continues to perpetuate and internalize Willy's false values, vowing to continue to strive to become what Willy desired him to be. By this point, Biff's bitterness and resentment of Willy have turned to sympathy and compassion. This transformation actually began on the night of Willy's death, during the restaurant scene in Act II when he tells one of the girls that Willy is a "fine, troubled prince. A hard-working, unappreciated prince" (90). Biff comes to view his father as a flawed man who "never knew who he was" and "had the wrong dreams" (111). His insights into his father suggest that he can redirect his own life to a more enjoyable and realistic future as he lets go of Willy's dreams and desires for him and becomes his own man.

In *Fences*, Cory's return to his father's house occurs on the day of Troy's funeral. Unlike Biff, he has not had the benefit of reuniting with and confronting his father since he was kicked out eight years before. As a result, Cory returns still harboring a great deal of anger and bitterness toward Troy. In fact, he tells his mother Rose that he has reservations about attending the funeral and had planned to stay away. As Cory tells it, leaving Troy's house those eight years ago moved him away from Troy's physical presence, but psychologically and emotionally, he still feels chained to him. Staying away from the funeral will be his way of defying Troy and moving from under his shadow:

> The whole time I was growing up. . . living in his house. . . Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere. It weighed on you and sunk into your flesh. It would wrap around you and lay there until you couldn't tell which one was you anymore. That

> shadow digging in your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you. Everywhere I looked, Troy Maxson was staring back at me. . . hiding under the bed. . . in the closet. . .I'm just saying I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow, Mama. (96-97)

Unlike Linda who is still uncomprehending and still very much in denial at the end of Miller's play, Rose shows that she has gained some insight, both into herself as well as her now-deceased husband's relationship with Cory. In response to his words she tells him:

> You can't be nobody but who you are, Cory. That shadow wasn't nothing but you growing into yourself. You either got to grow into it or cut it down to fit you. But that's all you got to make life with. That's all you got to measure yourself against that world out there. Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn't. . .and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was. I don't know if he was right or wrong. . .but I do know he meant to do more good than he meant to do harm (97).

As Rose leaves in order to let her words to Cory sink in, his half-sister Raynell, enters. At eight years old, she was born during the same year that Cory left home, and therefore, the two are essentially strangers. However, Cory's ability to surrender his anger and bitterness toward Troy comes as a result of the duet he and Raynell sing of a song Troy himself used to sing about an old dog named Blue. The song becomes a cathartic release for Cory. After they finish singing, Cory is ready to attend his father's funeral, telling Raynell to "go on in the house and change them shoes like Mama told you so *we* can go to Papa's funeral" (100, emphasis mine). Like Biff, then, Cory seems poised to move forward in life unshackled by the ghost of his father.

With *Fences*, Wilson brings to the forefront the plight of African Americans in their pursuit of the American dream, a plight that contains differences from those of Willy Loman, the representative common man of Miller's play. In his riff on *Death of a* Salesman, then, Wilson makes the point that although neither Willy Loman nor

Troy Maxson is immune from society's backlash, as an African American man, Troy is at a greater disadvantage. Both Willy and Troy are similar in their lack of success in achieving their dreams; however, the reason their dreams remain unrealized differs and helps to explain their contrasting coping methods. Willy's failure to succeed stems from his choice to pursue a sales career to which he was not suited. Troy's tragedy is that he had a talent for baseball, but could not succeed at it through no choice of his own. Qun Wang sums up the difference between Willy and Troy when he states that "if Willy Loman, as his son Biff proclaims at Willy's funeral, 'had the wrong dreams'. . ., what makes Troy's life tragic is that he does not have control of his own destiny" (165). Racial discrimination impedes Troy's ability to maximize his potential and gain financial and material success. Hence, despite the evidence of failure, Willy continues to wholeheartedly and unquestioningly pursue the American dream; his desperate perseverance stems from his continued belief in the ability to attain the American dream versus Troy's cynical rejection of this belief. Troy abandons this dream after finding that it betrays him—that equality and opportunity for all is a cruel myth. What is similar in their behavior is that neither man is willing to let go of his beliefs nor live fully in the present; it is this stubborn refusal that dooms their relationships with their sons.

In an interview with David Savran, Wilson stated that in *Fences*, "[e]ach generation gives the succeeding generation what they think they need. One question in the play is 'Are the tools we are given sufficient to compete in a world that is different from the one our parents knew?" (299). In *Fences,* Troy provides Cory with good tools, such as responsibility, hard work, and an acceptance of life's ups and downs, but he hinders Cory's ability to use these tools productively in the pursuit of his goals because Troy refused to believe that times were changing for the better and opportunities for black sports players were beginning to slowly open up. He lived in the past of his bitterness and would not move forward. Wilson's idea and question can also be applied to Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Willy attempts to pass on tools to his sons that are outdated and obsolete in a changing and more cutthroat business world. Willy continues to hearken back to a time when popularity was enough to enable one to attain success, and relationships between employer and employee were based upon loyalty rather than the bottom line; despite evidence to the contrary, Willy refuses to be proven wrong in

this and goes to his grave believing in the dream of business success. As a result of their stubborn resistance, both Willy and Troy damage the relationship with their sons and alter their sons' futures, so that it is only after the deaths of the fathers that the sons can begin to forge a new path for themselves.

Notes

[1] In an interview with David Savran, Wilson asserted that he was not familiar with Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, nor had he read the plays of Tennessee Williams; he notes that he "very purposefully didn't read them" (292).

[2] Michael Awkward notes, for example, the many similarities between the two plays, including "intergenerational male conflict; . . . marital infidelity; the consequences. . . of not achieving the American dream; a wife's victimization in and complicity with her husband's self-delusional efforts to maintain a positive sense of self despite evidence of his failures; paternal socialization of male offspring through sports; the thematic centrality of death; and finally, a concluding requiem in which mother, close male friend, and sons assess the meanings of the patriarch's life just before attending his funeral" (228).

[3] Although like Willy Loman, Troy has two sons, my focus will be on his younger son, Cory. Troy's relationship with his older son Lymon, however, contains similarities to Willy's relationship with Happy. In both cases, the fathers are less demanding of these sons than they are of Cory and Biff. Lymon is an unemployed musician who regularly visits his father on his Friday night payday to borrow money. While Troy berates him for his laziness and joblessness, he usually relents and gives him the money, and is nowhere near as demanding with Lymon as he is with Cory. This seems to be due to the fact that Troy was in the penitentiary when Lymon (his son from another relationship) was growing up, and he feels guilty about not having been there to instill responsibility and values in him. Thus, Troy has not invested as much in Lymon as he has in Cory. Moreover, just as at the end of *Death of a* Salesman, Happy is determined to continue following his father's dreams for him, so Lymon appears to be

following in Troy's footsteps as well. Like Troy, he too has found himself in jail, for forging checks, and can only attend Troy's funeral by permission.

[4] Wilson makes this point in an interview with David Savran. He states that "Troy knows that this boy has to go out and do battle with that world: 'So I had best prepare him because I know that's a harsh, cruel place out there. But that's going to be easy compared to what he's getting here. Ain't nobody gonna whip your ass like I'm gonna whip it'" (300).

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