

## The Struggle for Power by August Wilson's Male Characters

By Toni Arnold

In August Wilson's plays, the characters are developed in such a way to directly reflect the plight of African American people. One strong aspect that is consistently developed is the struggle of the black males. These men are struggling for a power that is out of reach to them because the power is held by others. Though it can be argued that this theme of struggling for power is seen in all of Wilson's plays, two characters that stand out are Troy from *Fences* and Levee from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Though these men live their lives in different decades, they have very similar situations. Both are oppressed by white culture and simultaneously oppressed by their heritage of bondage. Both also have freedom but feel little of it. Both Troy and Levee struggle against their oppressive pasts and their present surroundings, and when they try to regain the power in their lives, they fail, and end up bringing others down with them.

In the play, *Fences*, Troy's past dictates the kind of man he is today. His father has had a major impact on Troy. Troy says that he knows that his father never loved him, but his father stayed with the family because it was his duty to take care of his children. After an incident with his father where he was beat unconscious, Troy knew he needed to leave. Leaving the oppressive rule of his father should have brought Troy a feeling of freedom, but Troy found the exact opposite. Because of his tumultuous relationship with his father, Troy tries to control his own son's life. He also tries to control his son's future because he sees that Cory is heading down the same road that Troy was on and was rejected from. Cory has the chance to go to college on a football scholarship, yet Troy ruins his son's chances by not signing the form for his son to be recruited by a college football team. Since his own father did nothing to help him, Troy is doing what he thinks is his responsibility as a father for his son. He is trying to save Cory from the same athletic rejection Troy experienced when he was his age. But, he has kept the possibility of a better life away from Cory. He ruined his son's chances of getting out of this life, fulfilling a dream of playing football, and obtaining a college education.

Another injustice Troy lived through was the loss of a great opportunity because of the color of his skin. Troy was a skilled baseball player when he was a young man. It is assumed by Troy and all the other characters in the play that he would have made it to the Major Leagues if it were not for the color of his skin. He is very bitter about this injustice, and it has continued to affect him in his adulthood. Because he was born at a different time, he has lost this opportunity for himself, and this rejection affects his decisions later in life with his son, Cory. He thinks that Cory's job at the A&P is a great opportunity for him. When his wife, Rose, mentions the fact that Cory is going to be recruited by a college football team, Troy responds, "The white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling garbage" (*Fences* 35). Troy is upset with the injustice that he experienced in his life with athletics. Yet, he is holding Cory back from obtaining successes that Troy could only dream about obtaining. Troy has a low expectation of what black men can do with their lives just because these low expectations were put onto him. It is apparent that Troy wants his son to have a better life than his own, but he doesn't consider Cory's dreams and that times have changed enough since he

was young that these dreams do have the possibility of becoming realities. Troy's focus on being a good father to his son, though it may seem misguided, stems from the fact that his own father did not warn him of the world's injustices. Troy had to learn on his own, and Troy is trying to protect his son of the evil injustices that this life has, but he ends up pushing his son away because he cannot look past his own problems. He has pushed his son away just as his own father pushed him away, too.

After leaving the tyrannical rule of his father's house, he found that there were no jobs or places for blacks to live. He began stealing to survive. He met a woman and got her pregnant with his first son, Lyons. This responsibility weighed on him because now he had two more mouths to feed. Because he was a black man and could not find a job, he continued to steal in order to take care of himself and his new family. During a robbery, he killed a man in self-defense and was sent to jail for fifteen years, and Lyons's mother did not wait for him. The oppression of his life led him to kill a man and to go to jail. Now that Troy has a suitable job, he is still not satisfied. He has seen so much injustice in his life, he is unable to see any positives about the situation he is in now. It is only the unfairness of his job that he sees. He works as a garbage man. But, he is upset because it is apparent that the inequity and prejudice has drawn a line in this job as well. The white men who work there are in charge of driving the trucks, while the black men are in charge of lifting the garbage into the truck. Troy sees this as oppression, also. He knows that though he has a job that is awarded to both white and black men, the racial line is still carefully drawn. He is determined to cross this line because he cannot handle anymore racial prejudices in his life.

Troy works to gain power as a man by changing his job situation. He sees the racism within his workplace and seeks to change it. After going to his boss and then the union to make his complaint, he is given the job he desires, to be the driver of the garbage truck. He feels he is entitled to this job, yet he doesn't even have a license to drive the truck. This situation raises many questions. Why does Troy feel entitled to this job when he is not even qualified for it? Would he have been upset if he did not receive the job based on this fact? Would he have been happy for another black man if they received this promotion because he was qualified, or would he have felt that this job was taken from him? Though these questions cannot be answered by the text, it seems obvious from Troy's character that he sought after this job in order to gain back some sort of power in his life. This job symbolizes Troy's accomplishments in this world. He is finally able to prove to himself and the people around him that he is worthy and just as good as any other man, including white men. Though this promotion was a dream he was able to obtain, he finds that this job is lonely. He does not work with his friends, and he has no one to talk to. This is one dream he is able to achieve that has not affected those around him, just himself.

With respect to his role as a man and his relationship with his wife, Troy tries to regain his power, but he falls short. As a man, he is to provide for his family. He is unable to do this alone, and he must use the tragic injuries of his brother to fully provide for his family. His brother Gabriel was wounded in the war and was compensated with money. Troy uses this money to pay for his house. He feels weighed down by the guilt of using his brother's destruction as a way to jumpstart his own life. He feels like the only reason he has anything is because of the fact that his brother's life was ruined. He says, "If my brother didn't have that

metal plate in his head...I wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I'm fifty-three years old" (*Fences* 28). He ends up having his brother committed to a hospital. Though Troy says he was tricked into signing papers he didn't understand, Troy has put Gabriel away and he will no longer have a constant reminder of his own shortcomings.

Though he has a loving relationship with his wife Rose, he still strays and finds a woman with which he feels he can be a different man. He uses this affair as a way to escape from the responsibility of his life and the constant reminders of his shortcomings as a man. Rose has been a faithful wife to him. She has loved him and has stood by him, though she obviously did not agree with all of his decisions. She allowed him to be the man of their house, but Troy was unable to feel fulfilled by this. He needed to escape his home and his problems and be with someone where he can be a real man. But what he does is ruin the relationship with someone who accepts him for the man he is. His affair results in a baby, and he needs Rose to help him. She accepts the responsibility of raising this child, but she has cut off all emotional bonds with Troy. It is with this act that Troy loses more of his control and finds himself even more emasculated than before. Harry J. Elam says, "The traditional nature of their marriage allowed Troy to dominate, while Rose suppressed her will and desires" (180). Troy was unable to see that he did have control over one aspect of his life, yet he was too worried about proving his worth to others and to himself that he proved his unworthiness to his own wife. He is essentially alone, and he has ruined her life's happiness because he was searching for more power over his own life.

With all the oppression and injustices Troy has dealt with in his life, as a son, as an athlete, and as a worker, he tries to take back the power and control in his life. In the essay "Developing Character: *Fences*," Sandra Shannon says, "These feelings of being passed over change Troy into a man obsessed with extorting from life an equal measure of what was robbed from him" (95). Because his father was cruel and unloving and because the opportunities in his life were never fulfilled, he tries to control all the things in his present life, yet through his effort, he ends up bringing the others around him down, too. He is trying to make up for the oppression in his life, and he ends up oppressing others.

Just as Troy from *Fences*, Levee, from the play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, also has a past that dictates the man he is in the present time. At the young age of eight, Levee witnessed white men assault his mother. He watched as his father sold his land to one of these men, and then went after them to avenge this assault against her. His father was killed by these men. This was his first lesson of the powerlessness one feels at the hands of white men. As a man, he continues to be oppressed by those around him. He is controlled by his boss, Ma Rainey. His future career in music is dictated by white men, and even his fellow black men try to push him down. He continues to feel powerless in his life, and he does what he can to overcome this oppression he feels from other people and rise up to find his own power. The harder he tries to gain control of his life, the more he leads himself and others to destruction. His misplaced anger at all his problems and all the injustices he has encountered escalates until he is at the point of committing murder. His injustices that have silenced him have led him to silence another and refuse this person his own future.

Levee's relationship with other black men shows a major struggle for power. He works with other black musicians, and it is within this interaction that one can see the oppression and powerlessness that Levee feels. In the article "Blues on Broadway: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*," Sandra Shannon says, "Certainly racial oppression and the emasculation it seeks permeates all facets of these black musicians' lives, and racism is largely responsible for their inability to progress. These men are forced to prostitute their wonderful musical talents for mere pocket change and pats on their backs" (79). He does what he can to flex his power and try to bring the others around him down so that he can feel superior. The recording session begins with Levee walking in late. He has bought a new pair of shoes and makes a big production over pulling them out of the box and putting them on. The shoes symbolize power for Levee. He bought them with his own money, part of which he won in a lucky game of craps. The shoes are the one thing that Levee refers to with pride. The other men feel that these shoes are too expensive and a waste of money, but Levee feels powerful, more important, and better than these men because of these shoes. He puts them on and says, "Yeah! Now I'm ready! I can play some good music now!" (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* 24). The other band members could care less about his shoes and what they mean to him. Slow Drag, early in the play, even steps on his shoes, and when Levee calls him on it, Slow Drag sees no significance in what he has done.

Levee works hard to insult the other members of the band in order to bring them down and make himself feel better. Toledo is the one band member that Levee feels the most hostility towards. Toledo is a black man that lives within the same circumstances as Levee, but he is much different. Toledo is an educated black man who can read and seems to have a different outlook on life and the way in which black men should live in this world. Levee sees him as a black man who is adopting the white ways. He is insightful and magnifies Levee's own flaws, which makes Levee feel even more cut down. Levee says, "That's what the problem is with Toledo...reading all them books and things. He done got to the point where he forgot how to laugh and have a good time. Just like the white man" (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* 41). Though this conflict with Toledo is a verbal one, it escalates later in the play after Levee is brought down by the white men, and because he feels Toledo has assimilated with them, he takes his rage out on him.

Levee's career as a musician is a great source of his inability to claim power over his life. He works for Ma Rainey and has no creative power over their recording sessions. He tries to exert power over his fellow band members, but they refuse to do his version of the song even in the absence of their boss Ma Rainey. When he finally convinces the band members to play his version of the song, Ma comes in and says that they will do her version and the band accepts this. As a black person, Levee does not have control over many aspects of his life, but Ma Rainey reiterates that he does not even have control over women. He has no power over Ma Rainey. She holds the power and controls the band and even the white manager and white studio owner. As they are playing, Levee takes it upon himself to improvise on the song that the band is playing. This is a direct act to try to regain some control or power. But, Ma just wants the song played the way it is supposed to be played. He tells her that he is doing what he feels and that everyone should leave him alone about his music. Ma Rainey fires him, which reiterates and reminds him that this is not his music; this is hers. But Levee sees this as just another instance of oppression, someone in his world who is working to bring him down.

Though he is fired by Ma Rainey, Levee has one more chance to take control over his musical career. But, he must rely on the white studio owner to award him this opportunity. Levee's true desire is to break out on his own and create his own musical career that he can have power over. He is a witness to the way in which Ma Rainey has control over white men because of her musical career, and he wants this control, too. Sturdyvant gives Levee the impression that there is a chance to make it on his own, which he believes will finally give him the power to make his own decisions and be in charge of himself and others. Sturdyvant crushes his dreams and buys Levee's songs from him for a very little amount of money. In the article "Blues on Broadway: Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Sandra Shannon says that "blues performers had the possibility for success in the North, but their talent and hard work, which were used to provide success for themselves, once again provided the success and economic gain for someone else" (88). Shannon concludes by saying, "Wilson fashions drama out of the tragedy that blues performers experienced in 1920s America and demonstrates the limitations they faced when the music that was their life's blood was extorted from them" (88). Levee sees that he has been used by this white man, and he sees that he is worth nothing to this man that he has been trying so hard to please. The last chance for Levee to gain some power in his life has been ruined, and he must now admit that he has lost.

Toledo, who has proven to antagonize Levee, tells him that blacks make their own dissatisfaction and that they should all feel lucky to be accepted as entertainers in this world. He says that they are all imitations of white men, and because of Levee's interaction with the white studio owner, this comment infuriates him because he knows that the dissatisfaction he has is not of his own making, but the white man's. So, the suggestion of this oppression being his fault creates an angry wrath that he releases on Toledo. Eileen Crawford explains that "when the controls Levee has counted on and needs so badly are finally severed,...he knows no where else to turn but upon the group" (46). Toledo steps on Levee's new shoes, a symbol of power for him, and Levee kills him for this minor infraction. Though this occurred before with Slow Drag, it was not until after all his attempts to gain power failed that Levee saw this small act as a major problem. Levee stabs Toledo in the back, a symbolic place because he has turned on a man who has lived through the same oppression and feels the same powerlessness. With the killing of Toledo, Levee kills his chance of obtaining any power in his future and also silences a fellow black man who had the chance of obtaining power for himself, too.

In the plays, *Fences* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the two central male characters, Troy and Levee, are in a major struggle to overcome the oppression in their lives and rise above their difficult situations. Yet, these men face an impossible situation. They are constantly pushed down by others, including members of their own race. They struggle to gain this power that they never had, yet they fail to find power in their lives and end up pulling down others who are around them, especially those who are claiming some power of their own.

Levee and Troy are both depictions of all the hopes and dreams of a black male living in a free America. They portray the cruel reality that even though by law they are free men, they are still very much oppressed. They are not free men who can have the power and control over their own life's destiny. Throughout these narratives, the reader sees the dreams and hopes of these men dashed by an all-pervading control and oppression of their being. Even though these plays are set in decades that are a generation apart, each central male character is oppressed, each

male struggles for their own power, and each male fails in his attempts to obtain this power and in return, creates impossible situations for the other characters to obtain power. Shannon asserts that “black men frequently lash out at their sons or other blacks as alternate targets instead of confronting head-on the emasculating racism or the social and economic pressures they encounter...” (“Developing Character: *Fences*” 100). They have created a vicious cycle of dreams deferred for themselves and the people around them.

#### Works Cited

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