

WRESTLING JACOB IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS AND AUGUST WILSON'S *FENCES*

Andrew R. Davis*

Abstract

The connection between Troy Maxson's wrestling match with Death in August Wilson's *Fences* and the biblical story of Jacob wrestling a mysterious divine opponent in Genesis 32:22–32 has gone largely unnoticed by interpreters. The present article addresses this lacuna by examining the function of the wrestling match in each story as a way of comparing the characters of Troy and Jacob. Firstly, I will explore how the wrestling match represents for each character the culmination of past struggles and estrangement, and secondly, I will consider the diverse effects of the match for Troy and Jacob. Finally, I will argue that the advantage of this comparative study lies in the way the biblical story of Jacob brings to light aspects of *Fences* that may be underappreciated, or missed altogether, when the play is interpreted on its own. By showing how Wilson's play engages Scripture, this study also has implications for African American biblical hermeneutics, which affirms that the use of the Bible in art and literature is often a guide for producing biblical interpretations that are meaningful for African Americans.

In an essay on African American biblical hermeneutics, Randall Bailey defines cultural–historical interpretation as ‘the assessment and review of biblical interpretation in the history of the black community as well as looking at cultural interpretation in terms of contemporary black cultural constructs’, and he goes on to identify this approach as the most promising type of research being undertaken by African American biblical scholars.¹ While other research trajectories attempt to recover the African presence in the biblical text, and still others seek to expose the racist tendencies of certain interpretative traditions, the cultural–historical approach is a type of reader–response criticism that interprets the Bible through the lens of African American experiences and in this way generates new categories for reading the biblical text.² By ‘tap[ping] into the collective cultural wisdom across the generations as evidenced in the

*Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, 140 Commonwealth Avenue, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467. E-mail: davisax@bc.edu

selection and engagement of certain [biblical] texts', such research produces interpretations that are meaningful for African American communities, and it also pushes back against the prevailing paradigms of biblical scholarship that too often exclude the perspective of these communities.³ Because expressions of this 'collective cultural wisdom' are numerous and diverse—they include songs, sermons, novels, poetry, visual arts, etc.—studies which explore the use of biblical themes and motifs in African American art and literature have been just as numerous and diverse.⁴ Amid this diversity, however, is the shared commitment to understand how African Americans have read the Bible in order to develop new readings that will be meaningful to new generations.

The following article offers a cultural–historical interpretation of the patriarch Jacob, a biblical figure in whose struggles and peregrinations African Americans recognised their own dislocation and sorrow as well as hope and blessing. These themes are prominent, for example, in the slave spirituals 'Climbing Jacob's Ladder', which 'juxtapos[es] the sorrow of death to the promise of the ladder and Jesus',⁵ and 'Wrestlin' Jacob' (or 'Wrestle On, Jacob'), which commemorates Jacob's wrestling the 'angel' in Genesis 32.⁶ The impact of the latter spiritual was profound, as African slaves found in wrestling Jacob their own story of struggle and displacement, which began with the Middle Passage and continued in the forced slavery of the American South,⁷ but my own interest in the image has less to do with the spiritual than with its later appropriation by the playwright August Wilson, whose plays often touch on another relocation in African American history, namely, the Great Migration during the 20th century from the rural South to the urban North.⁸ In particular, his play *Fences* evokes the story of Jacob's wrestling match to explore the issues of familial estrangement and forced separation.

Fences is set in Pittsburgh around 1957 and is the sixth instalment in Wilson's 'decade cycle' of 10 plays that chronicle the experiences of African Americans in the USA in the 20th century. Premiering in 1985 (and therefore the third play in the cycle to be written and performed), the play depicts the attempts of Troy Maxson to surmount the fences (real and metaphorical) that enclose him at work and at home, while also showing the destructive effect of his efforts on those around him, especially his family. One of the play's most striking features are the three soliloquies that Troy addresses to Death personified. The first of these monologues is part of Troy's report of the wrestling match between himself and Death years earlier, a contest, which ended in a stalemate but with the expectation that a rematch was inevitable. The other two addresses come in the play's penultimate scenes in which Troy angrily challenges Death to this rematch, even raising his baseball bat in a combative stance. Then, in the final scene of the play, which takes place at Troy's funeral, we learn from his wife Rose that he died swinging the baseball bat and with a

grin on his face. The swinging bat and the grin suggest that Troy finally got a rematch with his supernatural adversary.

The connection between Troy's wrestling match with Death and the biblical story of Jacob wrestling a mysterious divine opponent in Genesis 32:22-32 has not gone unnoticed by readers of *Fences*.⁹ Indeed Wilson himself discussed the biblical story in an interview shortly after he wrote the play.¹⁰ However, no readers, to my knowledge, have fully explored the implications of this biblical allusion. Such is the goal of the present article, which will examine the function of the wrestling match in each story as a way of comparing the characters of Troy and Jacob. Using a comparative methodology that stresses thematic similarities between *Fences* and the Jacob story, I will first explore how the wrestling match represents for each character the culmination of past struggles and estrangement. Secondly, because the goal of this comparative study is not simply to identify analogous features of the stories but to highlight their differences, I will consider the diverse effects of the match for Troy and Jacob.¹¹ Indeed for all the initial similarities between the two characters, their wrestling matches have radically different outcomes and consequences for each. Finally, I will argue that the advantage of this comparative study lies in the way the biblical story of Jacob brings to light aspects of *Fences* that may be underappreciated, or missed altogether, when the play is interpreted on its own. By putting these two works in conversation, I will show not just their similarities and differences but will demonstrate in each of the following sections how the biblical story opens up new ways of interpreting *Fences*. Indeed the ultimate goal of this cultural-historical interpretation is to show how August Wilson has creatively rewritten Scripture and to probe the added depth this biblical layer gives to his depiction of African American lives in the wake of the Great Migration.

I. ESTRANGEMENT AND FLIGHT

The similarities between the wrestling matches of Troy and Jacob begin in the events that lead up to their respective contests. That both characters are alienated from family and friends is apparent from even a casual reading of *Fences* and the Book of Genesis, but a closer comparison reveals that this commonality extends beyond superficial similarities. First, both Troy and Jacob find themselves in physical danger at home and must flee. Each sets out alone on a journey that will test and transform him and which will eventually lead each to his wrestling match with a supernatural adversary. For Troy this journey begins in 1918, when at the age of 14 he runs away from home, and it ends in a northern city, as it did for millions of descendants of enslaved Africans during the Great Migration.¹² The danger that occasions Troy's flight is his own father, who 'cared nothing about no kids. A kid to him

wasn't nothing'.¹³ His father's selfishness is exemplified by his jealous rage when he discovers Troy fooling around with a young woman he himself desired. His father beats him, and as soon as Troy regains consciousness, he leaves home for good, but this fight with his father has a lasting effect on Troy and foreshadows his own contest with Death.¹⁴ His first years on his own are filled with petty crimes and eventually a homicide for which he serves 15 years in prison, where he finds several positive influences. There he discovers baseball and meets his lifelong friend Jim Bono, both of which become stabilizing forces in his life,¹⁵ and soon after his release he meets and marries Rose whom he assures that he has 'gotten all of that foolishness out of my system'.¹⁶ The key, it seems, to this transformation is relationality. In his first years on his own, Troy is driven by self-interest and individualism; he is accountable to no one and seems to relish his isolation. Baseball, Bono, and Rose offer Troy an alternative to this isolation, and for a while they are for him a source of support, stability, and accountability. But ultimately none is able to keep Troy grounded, for in the end Troy is alienated from everyone and everything in his life—baseball, family, Bono, his mistress Alberta, even his regular co-workers—and he returns to the isolation that defined his early adulthood and which will be epitomized by his one-on-one wrestling match with Death.

Like Troy, Jacob also flees his home under duress, experiences profound isolation that gradually gives way to relationship, but is alone again at the time of his wrestling match. Jacob's flight is occasioned by the threat of violence rather than an actual assault. The threat comes from his older brother Esau, who plans to kill Jacob over the birthright and blessing he has usurped (Genesis 25:27–34; 27:1–45; see discussion below). This threat is relayed to Jacob by his mother Rebekah, who counsels him to flee to her brother Laban in Haran and stay there until Esau's fury subsides.¹⁷

Thus familial strife forces Jacob to flee his home and make a life for himself abroad. Like Troy, Jacob begins his journey totally alone but gradually forms relationships that mitigate his isolation. This process begins upon his arrival in Haran, where he weeps when he first meets his future wife Rachel, and he is soon after received by his uncle Laban as 'truly my flesh and bone' (Genesis 29:11–14), an appraisal that echoes Adam's reaction to Eve (Genesis 2:23).¹⁸ As Terence Fretheim has written, 'the wordless and emotional recognition scene of kissing and weeping with Rachel (v. 11–12), and the warm welcome and acknowledgement of kinship by Laban (vv. 13–14) depict familial harmony'.¹⁹ For Jacob these two scenes mark an important shift away from his life as a solitary traveller to a life of familial relationships and obligations.

Yet, however restorative these relationships may be for Jacob, they never fully mitigate the estrangement that led to his flight in the first place. For just as Troy's struggle with his father became a template for his later life, so also the spectre of Jacob's conflict with Esau looms over his time in Haran, and the

harmony he first experienced with Rachel and Laban soon turns to discord. The familial strife that Jacob fled in Canaan is especially manifest in his dealing with Laban. The intimate kinship Laban first professed gives way to deception, which strongly echoes (in reverse) Jacob's dealings with his brother Esau: whereas in Canaan it was the younger Jacob who deceived his father and cheats his older brother, in Haran Jacob's uncle Laban tricks him into marrying Leah instead of Rachel (Genesis 29:21–30) and tries to cheat Jacob out of his wages (Genesis 30:35–36).²⁰ The correspondence of these episodes is especially clear in Laban's explanation for why he tricked Jacob into marrying the older Leah instead of Rachel; his remark that 'it is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older' (Genesis 29:26) is a rich allusion to Jacob's own treatment of his older brother.

The parallels between Jacob's life in Haran and in Canaan show the power that past events exert on Jacob's present reality and foreshadow a future that will inevitably involve his return to Canaan where he will have to face his brother Esau and confront the effects of their past dealings. When Jacob does finally journey home, he does so with his wives and property, but as they near Canaan, he sends everyone and everything ahead across the Jabbok, so that 'Jacob was left alone' (Genesis 32:25a). In this way his return to Canaan is also a return to the solitude that characterized his flight years earlier, and it is in this state of isolation that he encounters his supernatural adversary in the very same verse that reports his solitude (Genesis 32:25).

Thus the journey motif figures prominently in the stories of both Jacob and Troy. Both characters set out alone and gradually form relationships that have a stabilizing effect in their lives, but for both characters a former conflict casts a long shadow over their journey and ultimately drives them to a renewed solitude. In addition to these similarities, we can also note that the itinerancy of both Jacob and Troy is a theme that resonates with the slave spiritual 'Wrestlin' Jacob'. Although there are several variants of the song, in each version the threat of isolation looms ominously, as the singer resolves to hold tightly the hand of his sister and brother:

O, I hold my brudder wid a tremblin' hand;
 I would not let him go!
 I hold my sister wid a tremblin' hand;
 I would not let her go!²¹

While a full analysis of this song is beyond the scope of this article, its attention to the difficulties of the African diaspora allows us to locate *Fences* within the larger African American tradition on the biblical Jacob. In his displacement and alienation African slaves recognised their own exile, and this association with Jacob can be seen more than a century later in Wilson's depiction of the

Great Migration. Our comparison of Troy in *Fences* to Jacob allows us to appreciate in a new way how Wilson's depiction of the Great Migration is connected to a larger artistic tradition that has used Jacob to reflect on the physical and spiritual dislocation of African Americans.

II. FRATERNITY AND DECEPTION

Before turning to the wrestling matches themselves, we must explore another important similarity between Troy and Jacob, namely the contentious relationship each has with his brother. We have already noted that in the Book of Genesis Jacob's conflict with his brother Esau forced him into exile, but there is another aspect of their relationship that resonates deeply with Troy's relationship to his older brother Gabe: both Jacob and Troy take advantage of their brothers for their own financial gain, and in both cases this exploitation contributes significantly to the dissolution of each character's family.

In the biblical narrative, strife defines Esau and Jacob's relationship even before they are born (Genesis 25:23) but finds its fullest expression in the way the younger Jacob displaces Esau as the favoured and blessed son. This displacement begins with Esau's crude request for some stew, to which Jacob replies with self-interested calculation: 'First sell me your birthright (*běkōrâ*)' (Genesis 25:30-31).²² Besides laying the groundwork for future enmity between the brothers, this exchange demonstrates their profoundly different dispositions: on the one hand is Esau, whose rashness impairs his judgment, and on the other there is Jacob, who shrewdly sees an opportunity in his brother's impairment. Through this advantage Jacob succeeds in gaining Esau's birthright, which would have included a double portion of their father's estate (cf. Deuteronomy 21:17).

This contrast persists in a subsequent scene that recounts how Jacob went on to usurp the blessing (*běrākâ*) that their father intended for Esau (Genesis 27:1-45).²³ Unlike the previous episode, in which Jacob obtained Esau's birthright indecorously but not dishonestly, here Jacob gains the blessing from Isaac through outright deception. In another key difference, we find that it is Rebekah's craftiness, not Jacob's, that facilitates the usurpation. She is the one who instructs Jacob to disguise himself as Esau, so that he can receive the blessing which includes the promise: 'May peoples serve you (*ya'abdūkâ*), may nations bow down (*wěyištahăwû*) to you, may you be your brothers' master, may the sons of your mother bow down (*wěyištahăwû*) to you' (Genesis 27:29). When the deception is discovered, Esau weeps bitterly and begs his father for a blessing of his own, but Isaac has only one blessing to give, though he does offer his older son a quasi-blessing, which includes the telling line: 'you will serve (*ta'ăbōd*) your brother' (Genesis 27:40). Thus Jacob and Esau's relationship, at least in these first chapters of their story, is defined by

Esau's subordination and by Jacob's exploitation of his brother. Through guile Jacob dispossessed his brother of his blessing, just as he had his birthright, and their fraternal bond, if there ever was one, has become more like a fraternal bondage.

When we look at the relationship between Troy and his brother Gabe, we notice a similar strain in their fraternity. Just as the tension in Jacob and Esau's relationship centred on the younger's unscrupulous dispossession of the elder's entitlements, so also we find that a central tension in *Fences* is Troy's expropriation of Gabe's government stipends and his frustration over Gabe's attempts to live independently. Gabe was injured in World War II, lives with a metal plate in his head, and is mentally disabled. As compensation for his injury, he received 3,000 dollars from the government, which Troy used to purchase a house for his family, including Gabe. At first, this use of the money seems prudent, as Rose herself insists when she tells Troy that 'Gabe wasn't in no condition to manage that money'.²⁴ (Interestingly, some early Jewish exegetes thought the same about Esau and argued that Jacob's usurpation of the blessing was justified because he was more deserving.²⁵)

However, Troy's exploitation of Gabe does not stop with the 3,000 dollars. Just as Jacob's more innocuous expropriation of Esau's birthright set the stage for his underhanded usurpation of his brother's blessing, so also Troy's use of Gabe's initial government payout leads to his more sinister usurpation of his brother's monthly stipend. Also like Jacob's arrogation of the blessing, Troy's receipt of the stipend involves the deception of family members and, in a way, the audience itself. For we learn only gradually the circumstances that have led to Troy's treachery. The first hint of trouble is the news that Gabe has moved out of Troy's house and begun renting his own apartment. It is a source of tension between the brothers, as Gabe himself recognizes when he declares, 'Troy's mad at me', each of the three times he encounters his brother.²⁶ In the first two of these meetings Troy reassures Gabe that he is not mad. But in their final encounter, which comes after Troy has had to pay Gabe's 50-dollar fine for disturbing the peace, Troy pointedly mentions that this is the sixth or seventh time he has paid the fine.²⁷ The remark indicates Troy's growing ambivalence toward his brother, whose independence has become costly and burdensome.

This liability finally drives Troy to commit Gabe to the hospital and take for himself half of Gabe's monthly check. Significantly, all these changes take place off-stage, away from the eyes of the audience but also behind the backs of other characters. Rose only learns the news from Gabe's former landlady, and when Rose confronts Troy, he dissembles, denying any part in, or even knowledge of, his brother's institutionalisation. Even when she says that she has seen for herself where Troy signed the papers that committed Gabe to the hospital, he flatly denies doing so and calls the landlady a liar.

Troy's cover-up and lies are not a deception on the order of Jacob's subterfuge but they are just as destructive to his familial relationships. Rose, who had initially defended Troy's use of Gabe's money, now indicts him,²⁸ and later she likens Troy's exploitation of Gabe to his unfair treatment of Cory, whose path to success Troy has jealously obstructed.²⁹ Later in the final confrontation between Cory and Troy, Cory too cites his father's mistreatment of Gabe as the reason why Troy no longer has a place in their family.

Thus Jacob and Troy's fraternal relationships are instructive for the glimpses they provide into their character and motivations. Each acts out of his own self-interest, even when it means exploiting his brother or deceiving other family members who may stand in the way of his machinations. Such self-centeredness is consistent with the isolation that seems to follow Jacob and Troy and which produces a cycle of estrangement: the more selfishly they act, the more isolated they become, and the more isolated they are, the more they look out for their own interest. At the same time, these similar trajectories highlight the moral ambiguity of Troy's behaviour, an aspect of his character that is easy to overlook. Sometimes interpreters broadly characterise his relationship with Gabe as one of exploitation,³⁰ but that perspective is only clear at the end of the play. By comparing Troy's treatment of Gabe to Jacob's of Esau we can trace more clearly his gradual abasement. For just as Jacob's initial interactions with Esau are somewhat defensible but later devolve into deception, so Troy's treatment of Gabe first seems well-intentioned before giving way to exploitation. The comparison helps to underscore the shift that takes place in Troy's character over the course of the play.

III. 'YOU HAVE STRIVEN WITH BEINGS HUMAN AND DIVINE'
(GENESIS 32:29 [28])

These points of comparison between Troy and Jacob—the journey motif, their recurring isolation, their fraternal strife—all prepare us for their most striking similarity, namely, the wrestling match against a supernatural opponent. For both men the wrestling epitomises the struggles that have attended their respective journeys, and their opponents seem to embody the adversity they have faced.

As mentioned above, Jacob's wrestling match begins after he has sent his family and possessions across the Jabbok (*yabbōq*):

Jacob was left alone. A man (^{וְאִישׁ}) wrestled (*wayyē'ābēq*) with him until the break of dawn. He saw that he had not prevailed over him [Jacob], he [the man] struck his hip socket, and Jacob's (*ya'āqōb*) hip socket was injured as he wrestled (*bēhē'ābēqōd*) with him. He [the man] said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking", and he [Jacob] said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." He [the man] said to him [Jacob],

“What is your name?” and he said, “Jacob.” He [the man] said, “No longer will your name be Jacob but instead Israel, for you have striven with beings human and divine (*‘im-’ēlōhīm wē‘im-’ānāšīm*) and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked, “Tell me your name”, but he [the man] said, “Why do you ask my name?” and he blessed him there. Jacob named the place Peniel: “I have seen God (*’ēlōhīm*) face to face and my life has been preserved” (Genesis 32:25–31).

Perhaps the most striking feature of this episode is the mystery around the identity of Jacob’s opponent. Besides the opponent’s own refusal to identify himself (v. 30), the narrative contributes to this mystery by first calling him a ‘man’ in v. 25, but later this ‘man’ tells Jacob that he has striven with beings ‘humans and divine’ (v. 29). Jacob takes this statement as evidence that his opponent was indeed divine (v. 31). This confusion is further clouded by the lack of independent subjects in the account of the wrestling; almost every subject is an unspecified masculine singular. (The opacity of the biblical text is reflected in the need to include bracketed subjects in the above translation.) Appropriately enough for a description of wrestling, this stylistic feature makes it difficult for the reader to identify who is doing what, and the mystery surrounding Jacob’s opponent makes him an unusually versatile figure, one who is able to embody at once several elements from Jacob’s past.

Jewish tradition has identified the opponent as the patron angel of Esau,³¹ and there is much in the biblical text to commend this interpretation. The struggle between Jacob and his supernatural opponent recalls the struggle between Jacob and Esau that began in the womb (Genesis 25:22) and continued through birth, when Jacob emerged clutching Esau’s heel (Genesis 25:26). This grip on Esau’s heel (Heb. *‘āqēb*), which is the folk etymology of Jacob’s name (Heb. *ya‘āqōb*), is echoed in the verb for wrestling (*’bq*) and in the Jabbok (*yabbōq*) River that is the site of the wrestling. These echoes suggest that the wrestling match is somehow connected to Jacob’s struggle with his brother, but the strongest evidence for this connection comes after the match itself, when Jacob finally meets Esau again. As he urges Esau to accept his gifts of greeting, Jacob tells him that ‘seeing your face is like seeing the face of God’ (Genesis 33:10). The similarity between this statement and Jacob’s post-wrestling wonder over having seen God ‘face to face’ suggests a close alignment between the two encounters, as if the wrestling match at Jabbok was a surrogate for the confrontation with Esau that Jacob was dreading. Indeed Jacob’s realization in Genesis 32:31 that his life has been ‘preserved’ (*wattinnāšēl*) seems to be the answer to the prayer he made to Yahweh just a few verses earlier: ‘Save me (*haššīlēnī*) from the hand of my brother’ (Genesis 32:12).

However, Jacob’s conflict with Esau is not the only one represented in his wrestling match. Within the account of the wrestling match there are also distinct echoes of Jacob’s quarrels with Laban. For example, the nighttime

setting and the obscured identity of the opponent recall the cover of night that enabled Laban to trick Jacob into marrying Leah whom he mistook for Rachel (Genesis 29:21–26). Also noteworthy is the supernatural opponent's command to Jacob 'Let me go' (*šallēhēnī*) and Jacob's request for a blessing (Genesis 32:27). The exchange is a reversal of the conversation between Jacob and Laban two chapters earlier in which Jacob says to Laban 'Let me go' (*šallēhēnī*), but Laban wants to prolong the blessing that Jacob has brought to his house (Genesis 30:25, 27). Finally, we can note that Jacob's preservation in Genesis 32:31 (*wattinnāṣēl*), besides alluding to his prayer for deliverance from Esau, may also echo the wealth that God has 'delivered' (*wayyaṣṣēl*) to Jacob at Laban's expense (Genesis 31:9, 16).

Ultimately, Jacob's wrestling match with a supernatural opponent cannot be linked with just one particular struggle but seems to epitomize the swarm of conflicts from his past:

The image of wrestling has been implicit throughout the Jacob story: in his grabbing Esau's heel as he emerges from the womb, in his striving with Esau for birthright and blessing, in his rolling away the huge stone from the mouth of the well, and in his multiple contendings with Laban. Now, in this culminating moment of his life story, the characterizing image of wrestling is made explicit and literal.³²

The question for Jacob (and for Troy) will be to what extent this trend will continue after their wrestling matches.

Before exploring this question, however, we must look at how Troy's wrestling match likewise encapsulates the adversities he faced in the years leading up to it, most especially racism and his unfair treatment in professional baseball. The occasion for his first encounter with Death was a case of pneumonia that landed him in the hospital for three days. Troy's description of the match is replete with images drawn from his baseball career; for him, 'Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner'.³³ Such imagery connects the wrestling match with the profound resentment Troy feels over his stunted career in baseball,³⁴ so that the fight against Death becomes his chance to make up for defeat he suffered in professional sports. The correspondence between his struggle against Death and his refusal to accept his failed baseball career culminates in our final view of Troy in his batting stance, taunting Death to come for him.³⁵ The prevalence of baseball imagery to describe Troy's wrestling match against Death shows that the match is more than a fight against pneumonia; it also represents Troy's effort to overcome the unjust treatment he claims to have received in professional sports.³⁶

Another past (and present) adversity that is embedded within Troy's account of his wrestling match against Death is racism. According to his

description, Death wears ‘a white robe with a hood on it’, which is an unmistakable reference to the Ku Klux Klan.³⁷ Examples of racism are prevalent in Troy’s life, and its spectre looms over the entire play.³⁸ Its effects are most apparent in Troy’s professional life, first as a baseball player (‘The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team’³⁹) and later as a garbage collector (‘How come you got all the whites driving and the colored lifting’⁴⁰). By depicting Death as a Klansman, Troy explicitly links his wrestling match to his struggles against racial injustice and also makes the match the culmination of those struggles. Just as the white robe and hood are preeminent symbols of all racial oppression and violence, so also white-robed Death represents for Troy all the instances of racial oppression that he personally has faced.

Finally, we must note that Troy’s account of his wrestling match with Death bears a striking resemblance to his description of his fight with his father years earlier, though the latter is recounted in a subsequent scene. In both cases, Troy is taken by surprise, and though overmatched, he nonetheless fights back and manages to dispossess his opponents of their weapons—Death of his sickle and his father of the leather reins. Each fight concludes with Troy’s escape to safety. These similarities between the fights with Death and his father suggest that the former is in some way a continuation of the latter, and as we shall see, the pattern will play out again in Troy’s skirmishes with his son Cory.

While some interpreters have regarded Troy’s encounters with Death as a symbol of Troy’s masculinity and an example of his fortitude,⁴¹ the preceding comparison of Troy’s wrestling with Death and Jacob’s wrestling match in Genesis allows us to recognize the way that the wrestling draws together various aspects of the play. The language and imagery of Troy’s wrestling match, like Jacob’s, evoke various struggles he has encountered in life and suggest that the match is not an isolated incident but the culmination of these past struggles. Both characters face a supernatural opponent, but in neither case is the opponent definitively described. Such vagueness gives the ‘man’ in Genesis 32 and Death in *Fences* a multivalence and versatility which enable them to embody a variety of past adversaries.⁴² Recognising how the wrestling matches encapsulate Jacob and Troy’s past conflicts, we can now consider to what extent the matches lead to the resolution of these conflicts.

IV. THE AFTERMATH OF THE WRESTLING

So far this study has focused on how closely the stories Jacob and Troy parallel each other, most especially in the wrestling matches that represent the culmination of past conflicts. At the very least, such similarities invite us to read *Fences* with new eyes, using the biblical story to shed light on certain

aspects of the play that might otherwise be overlooked. The parallels also suggest that, in his depiction of Troy, Wilson may have been influenced by the Jacob story, which he himself cited in an interview. Edifying though these similarities may be, comparisons between two works that are separated, as the Bible and *Fences* are, by great distance in time and space are most illuminating when such similarities expose all the more starkly key differences. Often the contrasts bring to light new complexities and tensions that may be missed when each is read and interpreted in isolation. Such new understandings of Jacob and Troy are especially possible, I think, when we examine the different effects of each character's wrestling match. For Jacob it represents a turning point that leads him to reconcile fractured familial relationships, but for Troy the match prefigures more combative behaviour toward family and friends.

One way to examine the different effect of the wrestling match on these two characters is to consider the verbs that are used to describe their post-match interactions. Almost immediately after Jacob's divine opponent leaves, Jacob sees Esau approaching, and when they meet, Jacob bows low (*wayyīštahū*) seven times in deference to his brother, and Jacob's wives and children repeat this homage (Genesis 33:3, 6–7). This gesture effectively reverses the blessing that Jacob had received dishonestly and which was at the root of his estrangement from Esau. That blessing included the following assurance: 'May nations bow down (*wēyīštahūwū*) to you . . . may the sons of your mother bow down (*wēyīštahūwū*) to you' (Genesis 27:29). By bowing down to Esau, Jacob begins to bring balance to their relationship. This process continues as Esau greets his brother with a kiss, and together they weep (*wayyibkū*), a scene that echoes, and perhaps assuages, Esau's weeping when he learned that Jacob had usurped his blessing (Genesis 27:38). Finally, and most significantly, in Genesis 33:11 Jacob urges Esau to 'take my blessing' (*qah-nā* 'et-birkātī), which is exactly the language (in reverse) Esau previously used to describe Jacob's deceitful actions (Genesis 27:35–36). In all of these examples we find that Jacob's actions after his wrestling match seem to be efforts to restore his broken relationship with his brother. The description of their rapprochement includes words that had previously indicated their strife; the reuse of these words at the brothers' reunion signifies Jacob's attempt to heal past injuries.

When we turn to *Fences* and consider Troy's post-match tendencies, we find nearly the opposite of Jacob's trajectory. Rather than moving Troy toward reconciliation with his family members, Troy's encounter with Death seems to exacerbate his estrangement from them. Although some interpreters have claimed that the wrestling match had a positive effect on Troy,⁴³ it is telling how combative Troy's subsequent interactions are with the play's other characters. This belligerence is most apparent in his physical altercations with Rose and Cory. As Troy and Rose argue about the causes

and effects of his extramarital affair, she tells him: 'You should have held me tight. You should have grabbed me and held on.'⁴⁴ Ironically, Troy does exactly this as she tries to leave; he grabs her arm tight enough to hurt her.⁴⁵ His grip is only broken when Cory comes and knocks him down. This combativeness is characteristic of his other interactions with Cory, whom he shoves several times throughout the play.⁴⁶ In Troy's last scene one of these shoves escalates into a 'fierce and fully engaged' struggle between father and son, with Troy egging on Cory: 'You're gonna have to kill me . . . You're gonna have to kill me . . . Come on! Come on!'⁴⁷ These are the same taunts that Troy has directed at Death, declaring at one point that '[Death's] gonna have to fight to get me' and later telling Death to 'Come on! . . . Come on! . . . Come on!'.⁴⁸ These echoes demonstrate that, instead of moving beyond his wrestling match with Death, Troy seems intent on reengaging it with members of his family.

Although this belligerent impulse is most evident in his altercations with Rose and Cory, it even pervades Troy's language of affection. Consider, for example, his descriptions to Rose of their sexual intercourse: 'I fall down on you and try to blast a hole into forever',⁴⁹ and later, 'Me and you got some business to take care of. I'm gonna tear it up too.'⁵⁰ Even his affair with Alberta, which represents an escape from his fenced-in domestic life, he describes as another wrestling match: 'this woman just stuck onto me where I can't shake her loose. I done wrestled with it, tried to throw her off me . . . but she just stuck on tighter'.⁵¹ In all these examples we see no sign that Troy's initial wrestling match has mitigated the anger and antagonism that led to the wrestling match in the first place. Rather Troy's resentment and the number of his adversaries expand, as he waits for his rematch with Death. In the meantime he battles those closest to him; for Troy the wrestling match never seems to end. His first match against Death becomes a template for his relationships with Rose, Alberta, and especially Cory.

Despite these opposite trajectories of Jacob and Troy, the end result for both characters is curiously similar. Namely, the estrangement that has characterized most of their familial relationships worsens almost to the point of total dissolution. This ending is most obvious in *Fences*: in the final scenes of the play we learn that Gabe has been locked up; that Alberta has died in childbirth; that Rose has given up on her marriage to Troy and devotes all her time to the church; that Bono never stops by to visit Troy anymore; and that Troy and Cory are full of hatred for each other. 'This is a low moment for Troy; he is utterly alone.'⁵² But this isolation is hardly new for him; rather in his last years Troy resumes the friendless journey that he began at the age of 14 and which in the end will lead him to face Death alone again.

Jacob, for all his efforts at restitution for past wrongs, also resumes his pattern of alienation. In fact, the very deference that led to his partial

reconciliation with Esau becomes, in later chapters, a source of estrangement.⁵³ When his daughter Dinah is raped in the chapter after that reunion, Jacob silently avoids conflict at the expense of his daughter's and family's well-being,⁵⁴ and later Jacob passively lets the sibling rivalry between Joseph and his other sons devolve into violence.⁵⁵ The brothers' conflict leaves Jacob alone in Canaan where he resigns himself to solitude (Genesis 43:14; cf. 42:36). Both episodes mark a stunning reversal for Jacob, who had previously shown such ambition and resourcefulness. His post-wrestling match humility may have helped him reconcile with Esau, but in later incidents Jacob confuses deference with passivity in ways that are destructive for his family.

Estrangement does not have the final word, however, and it will be fitting to conclude this study in the same place that both the Jacob story and *Fences* end: at the deathbeds of Jacob and Troy, where there are hopeful signs for the future. These scenes in no way gloss over the damage that these two fathers have caused in the lives of their children: Jacob through his passivity and Troy through his abusive treatment of his family. However, they do show that the sins of the father will not necessarily be visited upon the children, to borrow Troy's words.⁵⁶ The scene at Jacob's deathbed at the end of Genesis becomes an opportunity for him to bless his sons and grandsons (Genesis 48–49). Already his sons have reconciled, but their unity is fortified by Jacob's blessing in Genesis 49, which addresses each son in turn. This benediction does not nullify past transgressions, as we note in the blessings of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi (vv. 3–7), but for the most part, Jacob's words adumbrate the successes that his sons will enjoy in the days to come.

So also *Fences* concludes with Troy's family gathered for his funeral, and although their fragmentation is apparent—Cory is away in the Marines, Lyons has been in jail, Gabe is institutionalised—there are signs of hope. Rose begins the process of reconciliation by trying to explain to Cory his father's cruelty and by encouraging her son to forgive him. But the true agents of the reconciliation are Raynell, Troy's daughter by Alberta who is now being raised by Rose, and Gabe. After Rose's monologue, Cory still refuses to attend Troy's funeral; only after he speaks with Raynell and together they sing Troy's song (learned from his own father) about the dog Blue does Cory decide to attend.⁵⁷ This acquiescence leads to the final scene of the play in which Gabe performs 'a slow, strange dance, eerie and life-giving',⁵⁸ which Peter Wolfe has described as 'an act of forgiveness so supreme that it can only be performed by a madman or a saint . . . [Gabe] has redeemed Troy's betrayal of him by squiring his brother into the company of the saints'.⁵⁹ For both Troy and Jacob it is only in death that they are able to find rest from the struggles, human and divine, that have defined their lives and relationships since they first set out on their own.

Throughout this study I have shown how similarities between the Jacob story and *Fences* highlight certain features of the play which may otherwise be missed. In this final comparison, it is a mix of similarity and difference that underscores the weight of past transgressions and the impossibility of full reconciliation. Because of the numerous parallels between Jacob and Troy, the former's post-match attempts to reconcile with his brother Esau puts in high relief the latter's continued belligerence. Whereas for Jacob the wrestling match represents a turning point, for Troy it becomes a template and a catalyst for continued hostility. And yet despite these divergent outcomes, neither character is able in the end to prevent the fragmentation of family and friends, a dissolution for which they bear significant responsibility. Although the causes and effects of Troy's destructive behaviour might be apparent without recourse to the biblical story of Jacob, their comparison brings into sharper focus these harmful aspects of Troy's character.

Furthermore, this essay has demonstrated the profound influence of the Jacob story within African American literature. We may never know whether Wilson drew on the biblical story of Jacob (consciously or not) in his depiction of Troy, but the preceding comparison of Genesis 32 and *Fences* has argued that distinct echoes of the former can be identified in the latter. These echoes suggest that Jacob's struggles were for Wilson a model of exile and estrangement, which he reinterpreted for his portrayal of the Great Migration. The precedent for this reuse of the Jacob story can already be seen in the slave spiritual 'Wrestlin' Jacob', which also depicts the struggles of (forced) migration.

Of course, this theme is not unique to *Fences*, since several of Wilson's plays address these struggles,⁶⁰ but *Fences* is exceptional within his corpus for its sustained engagement with a biblical figure, especially when one considers the playwright's ambivalence toward Christianity.⁶¹ Moreover, such engagement (and transformation) is an integral part of African American biblical hermeneutics, which takes for granted that what the Bible means cannot be divorced from what it has meant. The study of how biblical stories, characters, and motifs were rewritten in arts and literature of various eras is not an afterthought of biblical interpretation but provides the very categories, rooted in the experiences of African Americans, that make exegesis possible.

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- ¹ Randall Bailey, 'Academic Biblical Interpretation among African Americans in the United States' in V. Wimbush (ed.) *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 702. See also Michael Joseph Brown, *Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004), pp. 54–88.
- ² On the use of reader–response criticism in African American hermeneutics, see Brad R. Braxton, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), pp. 28–53.
- ³ Vincent Wimbush, 'Reading Texts as Reading Ourselves: A Chapter in the History of African–American Biblical Interpretation' in F. Segovia and A. Tolbert (eds) *Reading from this Place, 2 Vols.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), vol. 1, p. 102; see also idem, 'Interrupting the Spin: What Might Happen If African Americans Were to Become the Starting Point for the Academic Study of the Bible', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 52 (1998) 61–76.
- ⁴ It would be impossible to catalogue here all such studies, but the following have been especially helpful to my thinking on this subject. In addition to *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, which was edited by Vincent Wimbush and is cited above, see the essays collected in R. Bailey (ed.), *Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) and C. Felder (ed.), *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); see also Allen Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); James Cone, 'Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation' in C. West and E. Glaude (eds) *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), pp. 775–89; and Vincent Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).
- ⁵ David Hummon, 'Climbing Jacob's Ladder: Reconstructing the Ladder in African American Spirituals', *The Journal of American Culture* 31 (2008) 169. The image of Jacob's ladder was also prevalent in visual arts, such as the late 19th-century quilts of Harriet Powers (see Regenia Perry, *Harriet Powers's Bible Quilts* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), plate 7).
- ⁶ Although Jacob's opponent in Genesis 32 is commonly referred to as an 'angel', we shall see below that that designation is never given in the text. In fact, the opponent's identity and divine status remain opaque throughout the story.
- ⁷ The most common version of the song is the one published by Thomas Wentworth Higginson ('Negro Spirituals', *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 19 [June 1867], p. 689), though he was not the first to publish the version (see author unknown, 'Slave Songs on a Mission', *Southern Christian Advocate* (Charleston, SC), vol. VII [Dec. 29, 1843], p. 114). Higginson described the spiritual as 'one of the wildest and most striking of the whole series . . . I think it impressed my imagination more powerfully than any other of these songs' ('Negro Spirituals', p. 689). Similarly, Maud Cuney Hare, an early-20th-century historian of African American music, called it 'one of the most striking of the spirituals' and lists it among the songs 'of unusual importance' ('Afro-American Folk-Song Contribution', *The Music Observer*, vol. XV [Feb 1917], p. 13; eadem, *Negro*

- Musicians and their Music* [New York: G.K. Hall, 1996 (orig. 1936)], p. 70.
- ⁸ See Kim Pereira, *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995).
- ⁹ See Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *August Wilson: A Literary Companion* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2004), p. 72.
- ¹⁰ In response to a question on character development, Wilson answers: 'What you confront is part of yourself, your willingness to deal with the small imperial truths you have accumulated over your life. That's your baggage. And it can be terrifying. You're either wrestling with the devil or Jacob's angel' (quoted in Kim Powers, 'Theater in New Haven: An Interview with August Wilson', *Theater* 16 [1984] 55). Although the remark does not explicitly refer to *Fences*, Wilson had finished the play just a year before this interview, and as Powers notes in her introduction, *Fences* was, at the time of the interview, in production for its debut at the Yale Repertory Theatre.
- ¹¹ For discussions of comparative methodology that have influenced my own approach to this study, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christian Communities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 36–53; and Brent A. Strawn, 'Comparative Approaches: History, Theory, and the Image of God' in J. LeMon and K. Richards (eds) *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), pp. 117–42.
- ¹² For a history of the Great Migration, see Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010).
- ¹³ August Wilson, *Fences* (New York: Plume, 1986), 50.
- ¹⁴ In recounting this story, Troy himself realizes how his behaviour has mirrored that of his father whom he fled, remarking that 'the only thing that separated us was the matter of a few years' (*Ibid.*, 53). It is a chilling remark that further foreshadows Troy's belligerence, not only against Death but also against his own family, especially his son Cory (see Sandra Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* [Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1995], p. 100; and Pamela Jean Monaco, 'Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: From the Local to the Mythical in August Wilson' in M. Elkins (ed.) *August Wilson: A Casebook* [New York: Garland Publishing, 1994], pp. 96–97).
- ¹⁵ See Pereira, *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*, p. 40.
- ¹⁶ Wilson, *Fences*, p. 55.
- ¹⁷ This account of Jacob's flight is attributed to the Yahwistic (J) source of the Pentateuch. In this Priestly (P) version of the story, Jacob's parents are worried that he will marry a Hittite, so they send him to Laban to find a wife among his daughters (Genesis 27:46–28:9).
- ¹⁸ On the special relationship between a nephew and a maternal uncle, see Robert A. Oden, 'Jacob as Father, Husband, and Nephew: Kinship Studies and the Patriarchal Narratives', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983), pp. 199–202.
- ¹⁹ Terence Fretheim, 'The Book of Genesis' in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), vol. 1, p. 553.
- ²⁰ See Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979), p. 55.
- ²¹ This is the version published by Higginson ('Negro Spirituals', p. 689).
- ²² Robert Alter's translation of Esau's first words captures their roughness: 'Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff, for I am famished' (*The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* [New York: Norton, 2004], p. 131). See also Ephraim Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 195.

- ²³ It is worth noting from a source critical perspective that most scholars attribute both the story of Esau's forfeited birthright (Genesis 25:27-34) and the story of his usurped blessing (Genesis 27:1-45) to the J source.
- ²⁴ Wilson, *Fences*, p. 28.
- ²⁵ See David Marcus, 'Traditional Jewish Responses to the Question of Deceit in Genesis 27' in A. Bellis and J. Kaminsky (eds) *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), pp. 302-03.
- ²⁶ Wilson, *Fences*, pp. 25, 48, 66.
- ²⁷ In a comment that adumbrates his own motives in dealing with Gabe, Troy remarks that 'all [the police] want is the money' (*Ibid.*, p. 60). He views Gabe's landlady with a similar cynicism (*Ibid.*, p. 49).
- ²⁸ See Tara Green, 'Speaking of Voice and August Wilson's Women', in D. Williams and S. Shannon (eds) *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), p. 153.
- ²⁹ Wilson, *Fences*, pp. 75, 85, 87.
- ³⁰ Sandra Shannon writes, for example, that 'Gabe is Troy's alter ego. While Troy is brash and overbearing, Gabriel is gentle and docile. While Troy is consciously manipulative, Gabriel is dishearteningly naive' ('The Good Christian's Come and Gone: The Shifting Role of Christianity in August Wilson Plays', *MELUS* 16 [1989-1990] 134).
- ³¹ See *Genesis Rabbah*, 77:2; 78:6; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Tradition Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 404.
- ³² Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 179.
- ³³ Wilson, *Fences*, 10.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10, 34, 39. The negative freight of this imagery is also apparent in the way Troy uses it to characterize his conflict with his son Cory: 'You stay away from around me, boy. Don't you strike out. You living with a full count. Don't you strike out' (*Ibid.*, p. 72; see also p. 58).
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 95-96.
- ³⁶ Rose is not convinced that injustice is the main cause of Troy's failed career: 'Troy, why don't you admit you was too old to play in the major leagues? For once... why don't you admit that?' (*Ibid.*, p. 39).
- ³⁷ See Anna Blumenthal, "'More Stories Than the Devil Got Sinners': Troy's Stories in August Wilson's *Fences*", *American Drama* 9 (2000), pp. 82-83.
- ³⁸ See Michael Awkward, "'The Crooked with the Straights': *Fences*, Race, and the Politics of Adaptation' in A. Nadel (ed.) *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), pp. 205-229.
- ³⁹ Wilson, *Fences*, p. 34.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁴¹ For the wrestling match as a symbol of masculinity, see Peter Wolfe, *August Wilson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), p. 65; and Shannon, 'The Good Christian's Come and Gone', p. 134. As a symbol of fortitude, see Alan Nadel, 'Boundaries, Logistics, and Identity: The Property of Metaphor in *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*', in *May All Your Fences Have Gates*, p. 93; and Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*, p. 72.
- ⁴² Anna Blumenthal has also noted this multivalence in her discussion of 'the rapid reincarnations of Death' ('More Stories Than the Devil Got Sinners', p. 82).
- ⁴³ See Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*, p. 72; and Meiling Ching, 'Wrestling Against History', *Theater* 19 (1988) 71.
- ⁴⁴ Wilson, *Fences*, p. 70.
- ⁴⁵ See also Rose's description of Troy in the last scene of the play, after he has died: 'Sometimes when he touched he bruised. And sometimes when he took me in his arms he cut' (*Ibid.*, p. 97).
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 85, 87.

- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88. In the first drafts of the play this confrontation went even further, with Troy pulling out a gun and pointing it at Cory (see Joan Fishman, 'Developing His Song: August Wilson's *Fences*' in M. Elkins (ed.) *August Wilson: A Casebook* [New York: Garland Publishing, 1994], p. 171).
- ⁴⁸ Wilson, *Fences*, pp. 12 and 89, respectively.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63. Peter Wolfe remarks on Troy's affair with Alberta: 'As soon as Troy started dating her, he also began courting death—the death of the family routine he and Rose had toiled for 18 hard years to put together' (Wilson, *Fences*, p. 70), but I would argue that this 'death of the family' begins not with Alberta but with Troy's encounter with Death personified. The seeds of his destructive behaviour can be traced back to the desperate self-centeredness that was born of that encounter; his affair with Alberta is not the beginning of this process but an inevitable result of it.
- ⁵² Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, p. 102.
- ⁵³ It is worth noting that even Jacob's relationship with his brother is not fully reconciled. After Esau suggests that they travel together, Jacob demurs but promises to rejoin his brother in Seir (Genesis 33:12–14). Instead of proceeding to Seir, however, Jacob went to Succoth and then Shechem. Although they have made peace with each other, the two brothers are destined to live apart. Only once more do we see them together: when they bury their father Isaac (Genesis 35:29).
- ⁵⁴ For an extensive discussion of Jacob's silence vis-à-vis his sons' outrage, see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 445–75.
- ⁵⁵ Ironically, the root cause of the rivalry is the favoritism Jacob bestows on Joseph, just as the favour Jacob enjoyed from his own father Isaac led to conflict with Esau. In a further twist Jacob's older sons deceive him (about the fate of Joseph [Genesis 37:31–32]), just as Jacob had deceived Isaac.
- ⁵⁶ Wilson, *Fences*, p. 79.
- ⁵⁷ See C. Patrick Tyndall, 'Celebrating African-American Music and Spirituality in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *The Piano Lesson*', *Baylor Journal of Theatre and Performance* 3 (2006) 69–70; Sandra Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, p. 102.
- ⁵⁸ Wilson, *Fences*, p. 101.
- ⁵⁹ Wolfe, *August Wilson*, p. 75.
- ⁶⁰ Kim Pereira writes that his plays depict 'the effects of separation, migration, and reunion on the descendants of slaves who migrated from the rural South to the urban North... Wilson's focus is on their dreams, their restlessness, and their struggle to find practical and spiritual havens in an essentially hostile society' (*August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*, pp. 2–3).
- ⁶¹ See Snodgrass, *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*, pp. 169–71; Peter Wolfe, *August Wilson*, pp. 21–22; and Pamela Jean Monaco, 'Father, Son, and Holy Ghost', 92–93; Sandra Shannon, 'The Good Christian's Come and Gone', p. 136. This ambivalence is especially apparent in statements from Wilson himself, such as his oft-cited remark that 'God does not hear the prayers of blacks' (Ishmael Reed, 'In Search of August Wilson', *Connoisseur* 217 [March 1987] 95).

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