A parent is a crucial figure to their children in regards to social and emotional development. Research has proven that the style in which parents parent their children creates positive and negative effects on their child’s developmental outcomes. In the 1960’s, when concern over parenting was high, David Baumrind created a two dimensional scale to qualify four parenting styles—authoritarian, authoritative, uninvolved, and permissive—a parent uses based on how much they care for their child's wellbeing (x-axis) and how much control they assert on their child’s actions (y-axis). In the play, “Fences” by August wilson the reader is presented with an authoritarian parent, Troy. Authoritarian parents, have little warmth for their children's wellbeing and are controlling over their children’s actions. These two characteristics are evident in Troy, however he has no rational reason to parent his son, Cory, in the manner he does. Harry J. Elam Jr., an english professor at Stanford University, analyses why Troy feels his parenting style is called for. He creates the term “racial madness” to qualify it. Elam defines racial madness as a social and mental condition in which members of minorities, because of prior experiences, feel less substantial than the majority even when they are not. The reason why an irrational fears of prejudice has the ability to affect an individual on such a great scale can be attributed to, “conditions of oppression, racism, and restrictive prejudicial practices [that are] impressed on blacks [creating] a particular type of cultural neurosis (a relatively mild mental illness)” (Elam 612-614). It is clear that Troy suffers from this racial madness throughout the
play by the way he chooses to parent his son. Troy’s upbringing affects the way in which he parents his son, Cory, which destroys Cory’s career, but despite this Cory is able to transcend his father's racial madness.

The main conflict to occur throughout the play comes from the notion of sons wishing to escape their father’s control. In his youth, Troy worked for his father tirelessly. Although mentioned rarely, Troy’s father was an intricate part of shaping Troy’s character, as he is the only role model Troy had in his entire life, given that his mother left the family when he was eight. Gregory J. Hampton discusses how children look to a role model for guidance, “Little boys learn to be a man from whatever source is available at the time” (Hampton 194). Troy’s father was a sharecropper struggling with debt and, in an attempt to combat this, he forced all eleven of his children to work on the farm as soon as they were old enough to. As a result of this authoritarian parenting Troy leaves home as soon as he has the means, traveling north for Pennsylvania.

Unfortunately, when he arrives Troy finds many other African Americans, like himself, looking for work, but failing to get any because of the color of their skin. Troy constantly complains about the racism that he faced in his early life, that subsequently negatively impacted his life socially, politically, and financially. Specifically, Troy’s most common topic of complaint is when he discusses baseball, a predominantly white sport in the 1930’s. “I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were”(Wilson 14). Even on topics that most members of minorities celebrated Troy managed to be cynical. Jackie Robinson was one of the first colored players to play major league baseball. He was the face of unsegregated sports and most blacks believed his signing was the beginning of the end for segregation. Where most African Americans were rejoicing over Robinson's
accomplishments Troy's attitude was, “I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn’t even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn’t nobody” (Wilson 14).

Experiences such as these, in which Troy struggled to succeed because of his race, caused him to take less risks, avoiding controversy and abstract decisions. For example, instead of pursuing his dream to play baseball professionally he gave up the sport and settled for a job as a garbage man, a stereotypical job for an African American at the time. “Alan Nadel Points out the problem of Fences can be seen as Troy’s attempt to take measure of himself in a world that denied him of external referents”(Wattley 6). Troy was forced into this world that Nadel discusses because his father's authoritarian parenting style caused him to leave home at such a young age, exposing him to the hardships of the world abruptly instead of gradually.

Equivalent to his father, Troy is an authoritarian parent, depicted by the strong amount of control and little understanding he exerts on his son Cory. Troy controls his son’s actions multiple times throughout the play, however in a more extreme way than a father forcing his son to do chores. When Cory exhibits an interest in pursuing to play football in college in order to earn an athletic scholarship, Troy immediately dismisses the idea saying, “The white man ain’t gonna let you get nowhere with that football no way” (Wilson 50). Cory denies his father's wishes and continues to pursue playing football until Troy personally quits the team on Cory’s behalf.

Although this action is perceived by Cory and most readers as being unnecessary and unethical, Troy has good intentions. Troy wants his son to be his ideology of a man, meaning everything Troy's father was not, financially stable. “In the case of Troy Maxson, the first lesson
of masculine performance is fairly lucid: a man must provide for his family” (Hampton 197). He also is attempting to shield his son from the hardships and disappointments he faced in life due to racism, that his father had failed to shield him from. While talking to his wife, Rose, about why he forbids Cory play ball Troy says, “I don’t want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get” (Wilson 54). The “like me” Troy refers to is how he failed to play baseball professionally in his youth due to the color of his skin. However, in the 1950’s racism was less prevalent than it was during the time that Troy grew up in. Regardless, Troy’s idea of what it means to be masculine is “inseparable from his racial experience of a racist America” (Hampton 198), reintroducing Harry J. Elam’s term, “racial madness”. “Even as they escape the present madness, they embody the historical memory of primary ruptures, pains, and struggle within African-American existence” (Elam 616). Troy’s experience of not being able to play baseball compels him to effectively remove any hope Cory has of attending college.

This action that Troy makes for his son depicts how little understanding he has of his son’s aspirations and needs, further supporting the claim that Troy is an authoritarian parent. Countless instances of Troy choosing to be cruel to his son in an authoritarian way—forcing him to quit football, work at A&P, and complete multiple chores—causes Cory to confront him, “How come you ain’t never liked me?” (Wilson 51). When Cory asks his father this question it confirms to the reader Troy’s parenting style is unnecessarily harsh. Troy responds to this by saying it does not matter whether he likes his son or not, but rather that it is his duty to supply his family with food and shelter. The reason Troy feels this way is because of the difficult upbringing he experienced at the hands of his father. As mentioned earlier Troy's father struggled financially and it can be assumed that Troy did not always have a hearty meal or a welcoming
home to return to after a tiring day in the fields. He feels that if he is able to grant his son the luxurys his father was unable to achieve for him, he has succeeded as a father. However Troy has neglected to take into account the emotional aspect of parenting, being just as important as the financial aspect. Due to this mischaracterization of what it means to be an achieved parent Troy unfortunately has a similar relationship to his son as he did with his father, scornful and antagonistic.

Troy and Cory’s relationship concludes with a physical last physical encounter. This scene occurs after Cory has lost respect for his father due to an affair Troy had with another woman. Cory deliberately disrespects Troy by not saying “excuse me” when walking past. In an attempt to regain his authority and masculinity, Troy gets into a scuffle with his son over a baseball bat, that is swung between the two of them at each other. Their confrontation ends with Troy telling his son “Go on and get away from around my house” (Wilson 126). Cory collects his belongings and leaves his family, to live a life in the military, continuing the cycle that Troy’s father began, “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 afterwards” (Wattley 12). The notion of throwing a child out of the house is an action that is looked down upon by society, and for good reason. Children who are deserted by their families oftentimes have nowhere to go and can get into a life of crime. For example, John Hinckley, who had attempted to assassinate president Reagan had been kicked out of his house at a young age due to his unruly actions (Korsmeyer). When Troy left home in his youth he turned to a life of crime, earning himself fifteen years in jail; however Cory does not resort to this lifestyle. This is the first instance in which Cory does not follow in his father’s footsteps.
Cory does not return home until eight years later, after his father had died to attend his funeral; however, Cory had no intention of actually attending because of the turmoil Troy had put him through in his youth. Even though Cory had no relationship with his father after moving out “psychologically and emotionally he still feels chained to him” (Wattley 15). Cory initially feels that by not attending his father’s funeral he will be able to finally conquer Troy’s authoritarian parenting, “I’ve got to say no to him. One time in my life I’ve got to say no” (Wilson 136) he tells his mother. Cory’s mindset changes after he and Raynell, a product due to the affair Troy had, sing a duet their father used to sing. The song is a blues song titled, “Ol’ Blue” and it is about an old hunting dog, Blue, but in the context of the play the song is about a father who is trying to be a good provider for his family. “You know Blue was mighty true” (Wilson 139). The song concludes with Blue dying, “Blue stayed there till I came back … Old Blue died and I dug his grave”(Wilson 137) and acts as a “cathartic release for Cory” (Wattley 16). This allows him to realize that although his father had faults that negatively affected his life Troy hoped for his son to become the man he never could be, a solid role model and caring father. After the song concludes Cory is prepared to pay his respects to his now deceased father.

By attending Cory shows that he is ready to move on with his life, unshackled to his father's authoritarian control, something Troy was never able to leave behind. Before singing the song Cory’s mother had said, “You just like him. You got him in you good” (Wilson 137) referring to how similar Cory was to his father; however after deciding to attend, Cory proves he is not, “doomed to a cycle of paradox” (Hampton 200), overcoming his father's parenting style and racial madness.
Works Cited


