

## IRONY AS REPRESENTATION OF RACIAL SEGREGATION IN AUGUST WILSON'S "FENCES"

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### Abstract

Irony is figurative language that is frequently employed in literary works as a way to add interest to the text. Irony is a figure of speech employed in a sentence so that the intended meaning is different from the real meaning of the word, according to various dictionaries. One of the historical occurrences in the United States was racial segregation, which was intended to be a diplomatic separation between white society and African American society but instead supplied the same level of discrimination. Considering how the history of discrimination is depicted in play through figurative language: irony, the researcher conducted a study that focused on August Wilson's play entitled *Fences* (1984). This study used the theory of irony from Perrine (1994), to analyze the types of irony found in *Fences* and several sources of journals and history books to describe the history of racial segregation in the United States of America that occurred. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method, and the main data is the script of the drama *Fences*. The research result showed the type of irony in this playscript are able represent the racial segregation in United States. In conclusion, Wilson as a playwright effectively used irony in almost every round of his drama and this irony was also able to describe the situation of racial segregation that had occurred in United States.

### Keywords

**Drama, Irony, Figurative Language, Racial Segregation, Discrimination**

### INTRODUCTION

*Fences* is a play written by August Wilson in 1985. It is the 6th of Wilson's 10 "Pittsburgh Cycle" series. Set in 1950, *Fences* explores how African Americans struggle to live decent lives amidst discrimination and social segregation from white society. The point of view that is highlighted is on the main character Troy Maxon, a father who struggles to break free from the restraints of African-American life. From the point of view of characterization to dialogue, Wilson managed to explore the conflict on racial issues that occurred during the segregation period at that time. And the engraving of the story produces a uniqueness through dialogue that uses a lot of figurative languages.



One of the interesting things in this drama is how August Wilson represents segregation through irony. Irony is a figurative language in which something conveyed is not in accordance with reality, and irony is a good tool to describe history or events that occur in a literary work, as expressed by Hutcheon (1996) "It is irony in use, in discourse, that is its primary concern: the 'scene' of irony is a social and political scene."

Social and racial segregation is the separation of social class and race that covers public facilities, housing, education, employment, hospitals, to transportation based on racial differences. Mainly distinguish the environment of white society from African American society. However, this action ended in sadness and left sorrow to arouse hatred to this day. Segregation has occurred since the 1800s and began to fade after the Civil Rights Act was echoed, to be precise in 1964.

The segregation described through *Fences* is very thick with the discrimination that occurred in the 1950-1960s era against the African-American community. Discrimination through segregation has in fact left its mark in the present era. How not, the separation they feel is only because of their different skin and instead makes it difficult to live properly like other normal humans. Of course, it is good that the historical description of discrimination is blended through irony and makes the manuscript more unique and fun to enjoy and also deserves to be used as material for literary analysis. Literary works are actually not only providing a story with the intention of entertaining the reader, but also educating. A figurative language can be inserted as a tool to convey a meaning with an understanding or idea that is more visible even though implicitly, including irony. According to Sperber & Wilson (1986): "within our framework, an ironical remark will have as natural target the originators, real or imagined, of the utterances or opinions being echoed."

August Wilson is able to present these three types of irony in this script and makes *Fences* story interesting and presents an atmosphere of depressed life when the characters in the story try to deny or are reluctant to feel the pain that is repeated through struggles as an African-American community, especially the main character in this story, Troy was 53 years old in 1957. In the midst of regulatory constraints based on skin color, they always have limitations in their activities to the point of fear when they want to do something that is actually a human activity. And Troy strives to provide a more beautiful life for his family despite the pros and cons of educating his son, Cory. The use of

figurative language in this drama gives more value, how a message of struggle and events can be inserted through literary works that are shown and enjoyed by everyone. So, its function is not only as a work of entertainment, but also education.

Based on the uniqueness of the work that describes how the social situation in America occurs, the researcher will analyze the irony in August Wilson's work entitled *Fences* with its representation of Racial Segregation in the setting of the story. This analysis will use Perrine's (1996) theory as the main surgical tool, and relate it to historical events of racial segregation that occurred in the 1900s to the 1965s era. At that time, racial segregation occurred as an effort to separate the African-American community and immigrant communities from the Native Americans. The pretext of creating harmony through separation, segregation actually creates an unfavorable life for some community groups, including African-Americans. The separation has an impact on several aspects, such as employment, education, health facilities, and other aspects based on racial differences. The separation is detrimental to the African-American society where they have difficulty getting a decent life like other normal humans.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Irony is a form of figurative language when the meaning that is intended to be conveyed is different from the actual meaning. It can also refer to occurrences that turn out differently than anticipated. In short, irony is when something seems to be one thing but is another. Referring to Perrine's theory, Irony is a figure of speech in which words are used so that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the words (Perrine, 1996). Ermida argues in her book that irony comes from the word *eroneia*, it means an attitude of pretended ignorance one assumes before life so as to make others do likewise (Ermida, 2008). Starting from one of the characters, Abrams revealed by his quote, "In Greek comedy the character called the *eiron* was a dissembler, who characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the *alazon*—the self-deceiving and stupid braggart" (Abrams, 1999).

In general, the meaning of racism is broad; it can include race, culture, skin color, language, and more specific events such as racial segregation. This study will examine racial segregation, described through irony in drama scripts. The use of irony is not only

a story development tool but can also be a voice for aspirations for those who gain a voice. Cited from Robert Harris by Fett (Fett, 2008, p. 21) "it is an instrument of truth, provides wit and humor, and is usually at least obliquely critical, in that it deflates, scorns, or attacks." Fett argue, irony is frequently employed in satire because it enables the author to articulate cutting critique under the pretense of humor (2008, p. 21). A tool usually has a goal for what or by whom. In this study, irony will be used as a tool to dissect and describe how racism events occur in a literary work, including drama.

Drama is presented not only to provide entertainment, but also as a lesson. According to Freebody, "Drama in these times functions at both the macro and micro level. It is used to shape and spread messages and ideologies through ever diversifying and sophisticated forms of theatrical practice" (Freebody & Finneran, 2021, p. 9).

Freebody and Finneran explain how drama exists as a means of criticizing the social policy. They argue that many of the themes they address are sociological ideas informed by and informing of these times, which exist in their own right as policy concerns or public ideas. They, therefore, overlap significantly with questions of justice, rights, access, and oppression. Moreover, drama has (very deliberately) aligned itself with a social justice agenda. They do argue, however, that overwhelmingly the discourse in the field of drama is that of equity, inclusivity, empathy, and the pursuit of pro-social outcomes for the participant and audience members. It allows us to work inside the history, philosophy, and practice of drama, as well as outside it, exploring and critiquing its relationship to social policy and public discourse about 'these people, 'this work' and 'these times.' (Freebody & Finneran, 2021).

The study or learning of social resistance or propaganda activities can be learned through drama. According to Freebody (2021, p. 85), Drama is also used, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to sharpen and recruit the ideology for a variety of goals, including setting limits, inspiring a sense of belonging, resembling particular identities, and creating propaganda. No representation of place in these times without ideology.

According to Preston (Jacobs-jenkins et al., 2018, p. 3), The drama adaptation depicts how the writer wants to attract sympathy and is aware of racial discrimination. The delights of feeling "sympathy" (the therapist's term) for conventional but unlikely characters identified as bearers of "the Black experience" are among the continuities in racist performance from the 19th century. For a 19th-century audience, who hissed and

shouted to show their sympathy, the tragic tale of the "magical negro" and his girlfriend was as well known as the trope of the tragic sale of the lovely quadroon to a lecherous bidder. (Jacobs-jenkins et al., 2018)

Racism in the drama itself does not have to provide a solution to every social problem that occurs, and if the meaning is only to speak or convey a message, it is still good. As Preston reveals, Both Boucicault's melodrama and the melodramatic extremes of current American racism are legitimate if the play does not also offer solutions to the problem of racism if its instructional aim is less evident than its emotive or sentimental mission (2018, p. 14).

## **METHOD**

This research uses literary criticism as the core design, According to Abrams (Abrams, 1999), The study of literary criticism focuses on its definition, categorization, dissection (analysis), and evaluation (evaluation). A method of analysis based on certain approaches and theoretical frameworks is how literary criticism is defined. Literary criticism, according to Endraswara (2013, p. 72), is the critical analysis of literary works. Writers can discover what is contained in a literary work by conducting their own research. Endraswara goes on to explain that literary criticism can be linked to aesthetics through the author's role, literary value, imitation of nature, and practical issues. Because this study is focused on the intrinsic structure of literary works, it means that it takes an unbiased approach to the analysis of its data.

This research used the qualitative method that said by Moleong in Kusumastuti and Khoiron, (2019, p. 19), qualitative research is rooted in natural settings as a whole, relies on humans as research tools, utilizes qualitative methods, conducts data analysis inductively, directs research objectives to efforts to find theory from its basics, is descriptive, is more concerned with process. from the results, limiting the research focus, having a set of criteria to check the validity of the data, the research design is tentative, and the research results are agreed upon by both parties: the researcher and the research subject. The study is categorically categorized, described, and carefully assessed to determine the answers to the research questions. In this qualitative study, no attempt is made to control the scenario being studied; rather, it is concerned with the opinions,

experiences, and feelings of persons providing subjective data and formulating interpretations of social events as they occur spontaneously (Hancock, 2006).

The data used by researchers is text obtained from search results in books and on the internet. The data that researchers require to analyze irony comes from August Wilson's playscript *Fences*, which was first shown in 1985. Plume Press has also authorized publication of the script. The primary data sources for this study were playscripts, followed by books and journals regarding irony in literature and books about prejudice in America, particularly during racial segregation. Data collecting strategies are used to increase data capture by using figures of speech from literature and other supporting books. In this research, journal references and articles are also quite helpful.

The researcher chooses a mimetic approach to analyze *Fences* by August Wilson and irony theory by Perrine (1996) as a tool to interpret the data. According to Abrams, there is a connection between authors, competitors, readers, and literary works. Abrams created a diagram with four potential tactics. The techniques include mimetic, emotive, pragmatist, and objective techniques (Abrams, 1999).

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

The study discovered several findings. These are findings from the research results the representation of racial segregation through figurative language: irony in August Wilson's *Fences*.

### **Racial Segregation Through Irony in *Fences***

Irony can be used as a doorway to learn how things in the real world happen as the use of literary works as an imitation of what happens through the concept of mimesis, just as writers use figures of speech to express an implied idea. August Wilson drew the audience and the readers of his script to *Fences* so they may see how terrible the situation was for African-American society during racial segregation events. His use of the figures of speech he selected, including irony, helped him to accurately portray this circumstance.

The irony that was introduced into the script was able to convey how tragic the condition of discrimination that society was going through at the time was, where, generally speaking, many expectations of the African-American community failed since they did not match the reality that actually occurred. Through this study, the authors uncover information in theatre scripts that use figures of speech yet illustrate how racial

segregation actually took place based on historical facts. To demonstrate that a figure of speech can be employed in writing in a variety of complicated ways, including the representation of historical events, and that its use is not limited to aesthetic purposes.

The first instance is at the start of the narrative, when Bono and Troy discuss their jobs because Bono is concerned that calling Troy to his superiors may lead to his termination. Troy insisted that he was not afraid and did not care if he had to be fired if it meant that he had to raise the issue of the equality of positions, specifically the right of African Americans to be hired as garbage truck drivers as well as other positions, so that everyone could choose an equal position regardless of race (A. Wilson, 1985, p. 5).

According to the text excerpt, it can be inferred that this instance of situational irony because what is expected is not in line with reality. Situational irony is a description of a situation that is not in accordance with what the characters expect in the story. Situational irony is one of the important devices in a story, as Perrine argue in his book, “usually the most important kind for the story writer, the discrepancy is between appearance and reality, or between expectation and fulfillment, or between what is and what would seem appropriate” (Perrine, 1996). This situational irony portrayed prejudice in the context of the workplace during the era of racial segregation. when actual events don't match what Troy and other people want and dream of. Racial segregation has an effect on the workplace as well, particularly when there are limitations on titles and positions for the African-American population. Because historically, African-Americans were brought to America to be used as slaves, this culture became an ideology for white Native Americans that African-Americans have no right to own position equal or even higher with them. As a result, they will not be able to obtain an equal position like white people in America.

Racial segregation perpetuates discrimination by limiting the scope of job, which has a significant negative influence on African-American society. They have severe economic limitations since it is challenging to obtain additional income to maintain their families, and the cycle of poverty will remain as long as racial segregation persists. The poverty cycle can also be sensed in Troy's lineage, specifically in Lyon, his first wife's son. He only visits Troy's home to borrow money, and this has happened numerous times previously to the point that Troy is annoyed that his adult son is still doing so (A. Wilson, 1985, p. 18). Massey and Nancy Denton in their book: *American Apartheid* (1998) argued this intense racial segregation was constructed by whites through a number of conscious

decisions and deliberate institutional structures that are still in place today. The extent of black segregation is unparalleled and completely distinct from that of other groups, and it also exhibits little sign of change over time or advances in socioeconomic level.

Even though his father had offered him what appeared to be a garbage collector job, Lyon, a musician, claimed to not have gotten the right position and was hesitant to take it (1985, p. 20). He added that finding a job is quite challenging (1985, p. 84).

Segregation is greatly impacts those who wish to have a professional career in sports. This is illustrated in this script when Cory, son of Troy and Rose wants to focus on the sport of american football which he has been involved in since high school and gets an offer from a team from the campus, but Troy bluntly rejects Cory's desire to become an athlete. Troy prefers his son to finish school and then learn to be a car mechanic, or other things that can make a living because according to Troy a professional sports life will not guarantee Cory's future life (A. Wilson, 1985, p. 11).

Segregation has a significant negative influence on people who want to pursue professional careers in sports in addition to the workplace. This is demonstrated in the script when Cory, the son of Troy and Rose, expresses a desire to concentrate on American football, a sport in which he has been active since high school, and receives an offer from a college team, but Troy flatly rejects Cory's aspirations. Troy believes that his son should complete his education before pursuing a career as a mechanic or another lucrative field since he believes that playing professional sports will not guarantee Cory's future success (1985, p. 11).

For Troy, Rose and Bono's argument still does not guarantee that a professional sports career can support a human being for black society. If there really was equality, they should let everyone play. There are still many who are greater than Jackie Robinson, including himself, but they (the federation) do not provide a decent opportunity for the African-American community. Troy also adds that there is an athlete named Josh Gibson (who is also a real character), has a child who travels with broken shoes, which proves that the career of professional athletes has not been able to prosper the lives of African-Americans (1985, p. 12).

The irony in the remark refers to the disconnect between African-Americans' expectations and the realities of a professional sports career. All of them hold the opinion that since baseball, American football, and other sports are considered to be human



activities, African Americans should be treated equally when participating in them, including at the professional level. However, due to racial segregation at the time, what they actually received was discrimination, preventing them from experiencing the same things that white people did in the world of professional athletics.

Forms of discrimination perpetrated on athletes can be through various things, starting from the selection of core players, as well as the payment of salaries for each player. Cited by Lawrence, Pascal and Rapping suggest that young white players in 1950 earned higher salaries and bonuses than other African-American young players (Kahn, 1991, p. 398). Lawrence also added that another form of discrimination was that the standard of playing performance of black athletes was definitely higher than that of white athletes, making it increasingly difficult for them African Americans to qualify to become core players, or even qualify as professional athletes and become a disadvantage for them.

By shifting from a specialized area of labor, August Wilson also discussed the discrimination people face with regard to necessities of life, which are now sometimes needed in order to obtain jobs or more viable companies. Troy, who was previously one of the improbable African-American persons to obtain a work as a driver, succeeded to obtain a position as a garbage truck driver. Bono is surprised by Troy's lack of a driver's license, which is the issue. Troy has emerged as the company's center of attention since, in the past, he requested a promotion to become a driver, a job that was extremely difficult for African Americans to obtain. However, when Troy was given the position, it was discovered that he did not yet possess a driver's license. Bono is concerned that Mr. Rand, their boss, is planning to fire Troy instead because he is aware of this. Troy, though, is adamant that Mr. Rand doesn't know and doesn't need to know; what matters is that Troy is able to drive and works for the organization (A. Wilson, 1985, p. 49).

This is another form of situational irony, where Bono's expectations for Troy were not reached because he operated a garbage truck without a license presents a difficulty with this quotation. This is yet another example of the challenges the African-American community experienced while there was racial segregation. Because of the government's severe discrimination against African-Americans and the likelihood that they could face prison time, breaking the rules will be very difficult for them. In addition to paying fines, they may also face jail time.

Another noteworthy point is that Troy's lack of a license is not exceptional because most African-Americans struggle to get any type of license, let alone a driving one, which can be a lifesaver. Given how hard it is to obtain a license, it surprises both Bono and Rose when Troy succeeds in his goal of becoming a dump truck driver. The inability to obtain a license during the segregation era was another instance of discrimination against the African-American population. Licensing is an absolute thing that certifies whether someone is competent in that subject or not. The basic causes of African Americans' difficulties obtaining licenses and the levels of employment that truly contribute to these causes are revealed by Bernstein in his journal. He stated, First, it should be highlighted that licensing laws would have been detrimental to blacks even if their proponents had the greatest of intentions and had no animosity toward black people. 4 Skilled black workers typically had little formal training in their professions and frequently could not satisfy certain licensing requirements despite their practical experience because unions did not accept blacks into their apprenticeship training programs and because southern public schools provided blacks with very little vocational training in comparison to whites (Bernstein, 1994, p. 90).

The main point made by Bernstein is actually the consequences of the government's ongoing discrimination against African Americans, which is also what is portrayed in nearly all of *Fences's* playscript. This discrimination is meant to keep African Americans' economic status at a low level. Why did Troy insist on seeking an equal status with white people, hoping to give his son the mindset he needed to concentrate on getting a job after graduation and avoid the suffering his father and his ancestors experienced, thus breaking the cycle of poverty?

Additionally, Bernstein noted that the licensing statute was used by white working organizations as a tool to manipulate the election process and bar black persons from obtaining licenses (1994, p. 90). The fundamental reason for this law is clearly illustrated through the drama script *Fences* composed by August Wilson, how a restriction is very restrictive for them African-Americans and it is difficult to break it because after all these decisions are contained in the law and they must obey as the color of the United States of America.

When Troy recounts the events of his former life, it is another another depressing kind of discrimination. Troy tried to improve his family's life by moving to Mobile when



his father abandoned his parental duties to him and nine of his younger siblings, even though he was still only 14 years old. He did this in the hopes of leading a more respectable life. Troy traveled 200 miles on foot to get to Mobile, which startled a Lyons because Troy was just 14 years old and it seemed like nobody wanted to trek so far.

The irony of life at the time, Troy said, was that in addition to his father being unreliable for his family, segregation was such a torment for them that Troy had to leave town. Troy travelled 200 miles alone to get to the car since, in 1918, not many African-Americans owned cars like they do now. However, Troy never found hope when he arrived; he couldn't even locate a job or a place to live (A. Wilson, 1985, p. 57).

Troy's past misfortune in this quote highlights another form of situational irony, which amply demonstrates how the African-American community struggles in trying to improve their lives during a time of racial segregation by migrating to other cities even though, in the end, difficulties still befall them due to discrimination. There are various instances in this irony setting that show how racial segregation happens and leads to discrimination.

The first is Mobile, Alabama, which is where Troy went when he was 14 years old. The equal distribution of African-American society makes Mobile City one of the segregation hotspots that is said to be more orderly. Mobile City was also one of the origins of the civil rights movement to combat discrimination. The African-American community is hoped to work more humanely and prevent direct discrimination by white people because they are the center. Graham wrote on the creation of libraries for African Americans in his journal (Graham, 2019, p. 9) showed that Mobile, Alabama, one of the top southern cities for race relations, is thought to have been the birthplace of interracial collaboration.

The second is Troy's on foot voyage to the city of Mobile. Due to the legal implementation of prejudice through written laws, 1918 was a period of extreme discrimination. Public transit is a significant issue for individuals who desire to go quite a distance, in addition to the still high poverty rate of having a vehicle and the difficulties in getting a license. Jim Crow laws mandate that blacks and whites ride separate buses. They weren't allowed to sit together, and occasionally, black individuals weren't even allowed to board the bus if it was carrying white passengers. Troy's experience, who had to walk 200 miles to go to another city, serves as an illustration of this.

The third point is that the reality of discrimination has persisted despite the fact that African Americans have been living in one city for some time now. The reality that this was revealed through a story written after Troy had left was only sadness in a different form. Troy said, "I walked on down to Mobile and hitched up with some of them gentlemen that were headed this way," as he spoke to Lyon, Rose, and Bono. When you arrived here, you discovered that you were unable to obtain a job or a place to live. I believed I was free (1985, p. 57). This gap between expectations and reality illustrates the fact that, even when African Americans come together, a more beautiful existence cannot yet exist; instead, they deal with similar problems. Troy actually decided to steal until he was finally imprisoned and met by Bono, who has since become a buddy, because of the conflicting expectations after the 200-mile voyage (1985, p. 58).

## CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that the representations of racial segregation in August Wilson's *Fences*, are shown by the irony. With irony, it may also be a scenario where things turn out substantially differently than one would generally expect. Irony is frequently used in literary works as a figurative language. Irony is frequently utilized in a variety of literary genres, but it is not present in all literary works. However, the researcher discovered that irony was used in almost every act of August Wilson's playscript *Fences*, one of which begins at the beginning of the story when Troy denies that his actions were not an affair. However, towards the end of the story, it becomes clear that Bono's suspicions were correct, and that Troy had an affair and even had a child from a woman who is not his wife. Wilson describes this as an irony in his playscript. And the events that occurred, were also rich in irony, making life's sadness and misfortunes described through that irony.

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