

Name

Course

Professor

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### Striking Out in *Fences*

August Wilson's *Fences* tells the tale of Troy Maxon, one time Negro Leagues baseball player with promise on the horizon—as much security as one can have due to the color of his skin. Yet after being imprisoned for accidentally murdering someone, his hopes were dashed. He was relegated to the level of criminal stereotype perpetuating the difference between white success and black scrambling. Thus, since Troy's hopes were dashed, he has little faith that his son, Cory, can achieve similar dreams through football. Yet Cory exists in a different time, a time *after* the integration of baseball, a time where racism still runs rampant yet with a burgeoning Civil Rights era on the horizon. This creates a distinction between father and son, not only in age but also in sport. Unlike football, baseball is considered America's pastime, a staple of the American identity. Ironically, the field of dreams presented to Troy was more a mockery than a reality. Thus, Troy's relationship with the sport sours, as does his connection to the American dream. **Ultimately, baseball becomes a mockery of a plan for Troy, complicating how Troy relates to his son, Cory, since the promise it brings to America is not the same promise it brings to African Americans.**

According to Koprince's "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*," Troy's temporary success in baseball was a tangible version of the American dream stripped

away from him too soon. Troy states that as a black man in America, “you born with two strikes against you before you come to the plate” (Wilson 69), which emphasizes the distinction between heroes of American baseball like Babe Ruth and finally appreciated professionals like Troy merely because of the color of his skin. Troy is aware that anything he needs to do, he must give ten times the effort to get the same respect. However, following the American dream is problematic, for it suggests facilitated achievement of such dream for whites but not blacks. Thus, the metaphor of baseball in *Fences* acts as a contradiction to the idea of a “field of dreams” since playing rules are different based on race (Koprince 349). Thus, to indeed be labeled “America’s pastime,” baseball should have been integrated from the start, yet as a way to not *contaminate* the aura, black and whites were separated (Jabboury 7). This should have been an indicator to Troy not to bank on baseball to form his identity and self-worth in America since the country created a sport that failed to see value in *all* players due to skin color.

Thus, such ideological rules compared to actual rules of the game should not be surprising. There are not documents that “attest to baseball’s apartheid” (Koprince 349); instead, unstated segregation of the sport mirrored segregated life. Thus, racial oppression and lack of opportunity against African Americans was a natural part of life and an unfortunate natural part of Troy’s professional endeavor. Therefore, for Troy’s American dream to have such restrictions in place, it only makes sense for him to assume the same would be true for Cory. Troy does not need to see documentation of such discrimination; instead, he’s lived it and knows it still exists. For example, even black baseball players *in* the Negro Leagues still had to contend with racism amidst natural playing requirements like travel and hotel stays. “Most players found greater freedom and respect when they traveled outside the borders of the United States” (Koprince

350). Thus, to attain the American dream—even an African Americanized *version* of it—through baseball, a symbol of America, would always come with conditions for people like Troy.

Therefore, through Troy's search for identity, he seeks to align himself with the meaning of baseball—success, Americana, power. However, because he is an African American male, he is naturally impeded from achieving such grandeur. This is the problem with baseball for men like Troy—it provides false hope. However, for men like Cory, wanting to do what he loved, scouted for college and professional football, Cory connects his dreams with personal gain instead of what he thinks it should mean to be American. During Troy's time in the Negro Leagues, it was an honor to be considered a black counterpart to a white sport, which held the nation captive. For Cory, there is no problem with segregation or integration; instead, talent alone. Yet because Troy is unable to justify this difference, he fears that his son's dreams will be tarnished as well. Since Troy cannot connect his identity with the fulfillment of the American dream, he disables Cory from following the same path, never admitting that Cory follows his dream as an African American, rather than a black man trying to be something he isn't in white American society.

According to Baharavand (72), Troy's problem with baseball lies within as he fails to "self-authenticate" his ability to justify his life. Troy is a father, husband, hard worker, former baseball player, former imprisoned man. Yet, by the end, he is a loner who chooses to abandon these titles to cheat on the woman that helps render him stable within the family identity. Thus, even when Troy is in hot water with Rose, the conversation turns to baseball. "We're not talking about baseball! We're talking about you going off to lay in bed with another woman. . . and then bring it home to me. That's what we're talking about. We ain't talking about no baseball" (Wilson 67). Troy's attempt to justify his action based on freedoms is implausible since baseball afforded him no greatness. Instead, his *family* did, yet he chooses to bombard himself with institutionalized racism that won't go

away. Troy is almost consumed by the harsh racial realities of baseball from the past that he fails to live in the present and apologize for a series of missteps. This inability to self-authenticate suggests that black or white, Troy never would have been successful because he doesn't know what he wants or who he is; instead, he feels mere that the world has things to offer that he must attain. The prominence of baseball across the nation provides Troy with a false sense of security within a country that never wanted his success in the first place, which complicates how he views himself and others, like Cory. For example, Baharavand states, "Troy expects to be granted full citizenship in the North, where black people were supposed to have satisfactory jobs" (71), a sign that he fails to understand the world around him genuinely. He expects more than what society has allowed him to have but never comes to the realization that the community has more to offer Cory—albeit not *a lot* more, but at least something for Cory to forge his path. Such delusion makes dream attainment nearly impossible.

Thus, the idea of the American dream is something that pertains to white Americans only, and Troy's decision to deny Cory his chance to play football is not so much a reduction of his American dream connection, but rather Cory's strive toward self-actualization. The institutionalized racism of baseball does not exist with football for Cory, someone who is actively scouted *to* play. Yet Troy cannot see beyond his past, which complicates Cory's future. Troy refuses to acknowledge that the world has changed, which—as a good father—makes him worries that Cory will suffer the same fate he did, but at the same time, is concerning since Troy denies Cory his dreams. Ironically, Troy believes good players should play, regardless of race, but fails to extend it to his son. He states, "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 7) as he degrades Jackie

Robinson for being allowed to play just because he *is* black. Therefore, when he denies Cory the right to play because he is black, Troy reveals himself to be hypocritical or not self-aware.

Furthermore, when Troy *could* play in the Negro Leagues, he took the opportunity to do so, only leaving for circumstances beyond his control. The idea of the American dream as it pertains to baseball may be for whites only. Yet, other dreams—the dream of owning a house, the dream of having a family, even the dream of getting one's favored job (which Troy ultimately gets)—are attained by Troy yet possess less meaning because they fail to acknowledge the racial strife of the American past time. Troy places baseball on a pedestal, synonymous with *sports* in his mind, which complicates Cory's ability to achieve dreams of his own, even though his father has achieved so much (Valle 15). Yet baseball remains Troy's Achilles' Heel, which fails to see how far he *has* come. Thus, Troy remains discontent for “because he was born at the wrong time. He never earned the recognition or the money which he felt he deserved, and any discussion of professional sports will often push him to bitterness” (Jabboury 5). Therefore, with his knowledge of the past, Troy seeks to deny Cory's football dream because he chooses not to admit the world *has* changed since his ball-playing days—even through the achievement of his distinct dreams—which creates excellent conflict between father and son.

One must also question if there exists an element of jealousy between Troy and Cory. By the time the Negro Leagues were integrated with the Major Leagues, Troy was too old to be considered even if he *could*. Troy's achievement of a family and roof over his head *as a black man* was nothing to scoff at, yet because he couldn't achieve *the* American dream, nothing else mattered. Thus, for a man like Troy who had to fight so hard just to get recognized during and time where great migrations to the North occurred so African Americans could have a better life—with the last thing on their mind to play *baseball*—to see his young son be *handed a*

*scholarship* for a sport that had no racial milestones is almost a joke. Where one father should be proud of his son for achieving such greatness, primarily as an African American male, Troy, instead, uses this as a way to condemn him, for if Troy believes the times have not changed, then he can justify not helping Cory get on the football team. Yet for him to admit that times *have* changed, it means that he must watch his son thrive in a realm with promise—something Troy never felt. Troy resents Jackie Robinson for being the posterchild of baseball because of his skin color is the same way Troy resents Cory for being purely talented and *happens* to be black. Troy dislikes the myth of baseball and the subsequent tale of Jackie Robinson *because* he is black; Troy makes the wrong decision when he denies Cory his chance to play based on *talent* (Rutter 80). Troy fails to realize that in sports, skin tone *now* might not be such a damning barrier because it still *is* in society.

Ultimately, Troy's focus on being part of the American dream with baseball overtakes his life to the point where his actual plans attained fall to the wayside. His relationship with his son crumbles as his complicated past with baseball fails to allow them to connect over sports in a way that they should. Troy's identity as a forgotten American sportsman because of white society extends to his melancholy over Cory's perceived similar attempt. But what Troy fails to understand is that Cory wants to play football for *himself*, not anyone else, not to break a barrier, not to set a standard, merely because he is *good* at it and wants to pursue it. Troy, on the other hand, not entirely guilty for he *was* a product of his highly segregated society, wanted to *be* the white American for whom baseball stood. Yet, failure to acknowledge the impossibility of this reality suggests that Troy's relationship with the world exists partly in delusion, for what is in his reach seems to mean little to him. Yet, what is just out of his reach—and easily attainable by whites—will forever be so.

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