

The american dream in the 1950s: a father's quest



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The American Dream means different things to different people, but the basic principle remains the same: putting in enough hard work will guarantee you a happy and successful life. It is a belief that adheres so tightly to the nation built on the ideals of individualism and independence. Aside from the natives' tribes of course, everyone in America is here because they or their parents immigrated here. This is a fact worth consideration, since all those immigrants come to the country with almost nothing, making "hard work" their only shot at socioeconomic mobility. But that assumes a perfect America where everyone is of the same standing, with equal rights and opportunities, and ignores the subjectivity and differences in interpretation of this so-called dream, especially in terms of different generations. Through his play *Fences*, August Wilson not only is able to portray the struggle for the American Dream, but also the complex issues of race that arise as his characters strive for a better life.

Commonly, parents that were not able to achieve their goals instead turn to the hope that their children will at least be granted an easier time and in turn succeed in their place. Troy Maxson, the main character of *Fences* and father of three, reveals his version of the American Dream through the expectations he has for his two sons, Cory and Lyons. Troy constantly tries to steer them in the "right" direction by offering them stable jobs so that they can settle down and live an honest and trouble-free life, because that's what Troy perceives to be the best option, as it has worked out for himself. "I don't know why [Lyons] don't go and get him a decent job and take care of that woman he got" (1. 1. 7).

Troy's strong work ethic and extreme sense of responsibility can be easily attributed to how his father raised him, which also bleeds into how he is trying to raise his children. Troy describes him as a man who cared about nothing but his work. " My daddy ain't cared nothing about no kids. A kid to him wasn't nothing. All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you working (1. 4. 14)." But as cruel and abusive as he was, he also worked hard to make sure that all eleven of his children were fed. He did not provide his children with love and affection but felt an unwavering responsibility towards them, all traits that Troy grows to mirror. Troy may not beat his sons with leather straps or rape their girlfriends, in that way he is much better, but in the end, he became almost the same person as his father. Just a little less cruel (1. 4. 14).

Cory, as opposed to Lyons, bears the brunt of Troy's lessons on responsibility. A nice symmetry is shown through these two, as Troy used to be an exponential baseball player on his way to the Major Leagues while Cory manages to score a college scholarship through football. Cory's mother Rose even comments: " He's just trying to be like you with the sports" (1. 3. 11). But Troy will do anything he can to prevent that. The reason for that ties back with his idea of the American Dream. He wants to save Cory from the hardships he will face as a black sportsman in a still very racist 1950s America. He would rather crush his son's dreams early on than let him face the reality of it later down the line. He also says: " You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you" (1. 3. 11). Even if Cory does go

to college and make it into a team, his race puts him at risk of being removed if, say, his white coach feels it should be so. This does not lend to much stability at all. But when you know a trade, however, your skill will always lead to some work.

There is not much else to his decision, even though conflict arises when Cory accuses Troy of having ulterior motives based on his own feelings. " You just scared I'm gonna be better than you, that's all" (2. 1. 16). Cory believes his father is jealous that his son is getting opportunities that he never had. But when considering the American Dream, Cory's quote does hold a bit of truth. Troy does want Cory to be better than him. He doesn't want his son stuck in the same situation that he was. And though it may look like Troy is acting on his own bitterness, he may see it as only acting on the urge to protect his son.

The nature of society in the 1950s played a major part in Troy's decision to pull this opportunity from Cory. Even though the nation was slowly inching towards equality, discrimination and segregation is still extremely prevalent, as put by Troy regarding his job as a garbage man: " I went to Mr. Rand and asked him, ' Why? Why you got white mens driving and the colored lifting?'" (1. 1. 3). This shows that Troy is very aware of the place he is put in, and how hard it is to rise from it. He also firmly believes that his race held him back from becoming a professional baseball player, a fact that is stated by his friend Bono early in the play: " I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were" (1. 1. 5). A lot of his decisions are made with this inequality considered. That's why he does not allow his son to dream big; because he's seen racism take all of

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it away. “ The white man ain’t gonna let him get nowhere with that football. (1. 1. 4)” He will not even allow Cory to try; because he is so certain he’s going to fail.

In the end, all Troy really wanted was the best for his children, although he might’ve went about it the wrong way. His stubbornness and inability to accept change might’ve hindered Cory’s shot at a better life. It’s strange that he did not stop to consider that football would allow Cory to go to college, which in turn would give him access to higher-income jobs. But Troy held his own experiences above anything else. All he really wanted was to guide his sons down the path of hard work and responsibility, a path that he found to be the most successful for him. All he wanted for them was stability in a very unstable time for black men in America.