

A black man in a
white-dominated
world in fences



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In the play *Fences*, written by August Wilson, the theatrical is full of symbolism that shows the meaning to growth and death through; baseball seeds and blues. At the same time, *Fences* views the African-American experience and relations. Troy an ex-Negro Baseball League player deals with his bitterness that is affecting his family. *Fences* is the odd man out because it's about one individual and everything focuses around him. The back yard of an urban home becomes the setting to the Maxson family troubles. Besides, the protagonist Troy Maxson is represented as “ the purest strain of the survival instinct in the African-American race” [Pereira, 1995]. Wilson did not name his play, *Fences*, simply because the dramatic action climaxes strongly on the building of a fence in the Maxson's backyard, rather the characters lives changing around the fence-building project. The fence serves as both a literal and a figurative device, representing the relationships that bond and break in the arena of the backyard.

As it been said, *Fences* is against the metaphor of property and its historical meaning, particularly the connection between property rights and human rights, for African Americans; it is full of symbolism. The game of baseball has long been regarded as a metaphor for the American dream – an expression of hope, democratic values, and the drive for individual success. Baseball has become the great repository of national ideals, the symbol of all that is good in American life: fair play-sportsmanship; the rule of law-objective arbitration of disputes; equal opportunity-each side has its innings; the brotherhood of man -bleacher harmony and more. Furthermore, in *Fences*, by situating Troy within three of baseball's mythic settings-the garden, the battlefield, and the sacred space – Wilson contradicts the idea of

America as a “ field of dreams,” using baseball instead as a metaphor for heroic challenge [Herrington, 2002: 73].

It is evident that in *Fences* Wilson uses Troy’s experience in the Negro Leagues to demonstrate that the American dream remained out of reach for people of African descent. When Troy’s friend Jim Bono remarks that Babe Ruth and Josh Gibson were the only players to hit more home runs than Troy, Troy answers, “ What it ever get me? Ain’t got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of” [Wilson, 1986: 9]. Troy’s wife, Rose, and Bono both claim that times have changed since Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball, that many black players are involved in professional sports now, and that Troy “ just come along too early” [9]. To this argument Troy responds indignantly: “ There ought not never have been no time called too early! . . . 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. I’m talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don’t care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play . . . then they ought to have let you play” [Wilson, 1986: 9-10]. Curiously enough, in *Fences*, Troy aligns himself with “ the house of Ruth” rather than with “ the house of Robinson,” not only through his overt criticism of Robinson, but through his self-styled image as a slugger. Like Babe Ruth (and his Negro League counterpart, Gibson), Troy has embraced a conservative approach to the sport of baseball, eschewing the running game of Robinson or the spectacular fielding of Mays, and focusing instead on hitting the ball out of the park. Troy says to Bono, “ You get one of them

fastballs, about waist high, over the outside corner of the plate where you can get the meat of the bat on it ... and good god! You can kiss it goodbye” [Wilson, 1986: 10]. By connecting himself with “ the house of Ruth”, Troy not only transcends certain racial stereotypes, but he affirms that he can beat the white man at his own game.

Troy’s metaphorical references to Robinson’s brand of baseball help to capture the double consciousness [Du Bois 45] of African American experience; for as a black slugger in a world dominated by whites, Troy inevitably belongs simultaneously to “ the house of Ruth” and “ the house of Robinson.” He is both an American and a black man – “ two souls, two thoughts, two incongruous strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”. Driven to see himself and to measure his success through the lens of white America, Troy embodies both the psychological fragmentation of the black American and the dualistic nature of black baseball- a cultural institution that describes as an ironically compressed expression of shame and pride, of degradation and achievement.

Besides invoking the falsity of the American dream in *Fences*, Wilson makes use of the stew metaphor in *Fences* to illustrate the economic inequities experienced by members of the black working class. Troy Maxson recalls the following incident witnessed in a restaurant: “ I seen a white fellow come in there and order a bowl of stew. Pope picked all the meat out of the pot for him. Man ain’t had nothing but a bowl of meat! Negro come behind him and ain’t got nothing but the potatoes and carrots” [Wilson, 1986: 23]. Through the metaphor of the cultural stew, then, Wilson illustrates what Baker calls

the “ economics of slavery” – a governing statement of American history that perpetuates the economic structure and patriarchal myths of the antebellum South [Baker, 1984: 26-27]. Actually, in *Fences* the closest, that Troy comes to participating in the American dream- and hence inhabiting such a paradise- is during his life in the Negro Leagues.

Wilson associates the American dream with Troy’s younger days as a ballplayer. For Troy, however, the American dream has turned into a nightmare. Therefore, Troy Maxson is indeed considered a tragic hero and there are pieces of evidence throughout the aforementioned play that further proves it: instead of limitless opportunity, he has come to know racial discrimination and poverty. At age 53, this former Negro League hero is a garbage collector who ekes out a meager existence, working arduously to support his family and living from hand to mouth. “ I do the best I can do,” he tells Rose. “ I come in here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain’t got no tears. I done spent them” [Wilson, 1986: 40]. Troy claims that he would not even have a roof over his head if it were not for the \$3, 000 that the government gave to his mentally disabled brother, Gabriel, following a serious head injury in World War II. It is known that a tragic hero is a character who used to do good deeds in the light of others but allows for his flaws or inner struggles to overcome him. Aristotle once said that a tragic hero is, “ one who does not fall into misfortune though vice or depravity, but falls because of some mistake”. As a result, this downfall leads to the character’s death. In the case of Troy Maxson, it is clear that he constantly struggles to keep up with

good deeds for his family, but unfortunately allowed his inner flaws to lead him to his lonely and tragic death.

In *Fences* Wilson converts Troy's playing field into a battleground.

Throughout the play Troy is pictured as a warrior, fighting to earn a living and to stay alive in a world that repeatedly discriminates against him. As Shannon has noted, Troy sees life as a baseball contest. He tells Rose: "You got to guard the plate closely . . . always looking for the curve-ball on the inside corner. You can't afford to let none get past you. You can't afford a call strike. If you going down . . . you going down swinging" [Wilson, 1986: 69]. Troy's front yard is literally turned into a battleground during his confrontations with his younger son, Cory. When this idea of getting into college football is brought onto Troy's table, his immediate response was to say no. The reason for this action was clear. He was protecting his son from having high hopes because he believed the color barrier was not broken. Troy's efforts to prevent his son from playing football can be viewed as a form of "racial madness"- a term that suggests that social and political forces can impact the black psyche and that decades of oppression can induce a collective psychosis [Wilson, 1986: 6]. In *Fences*, this racial madness is illustrated most vividly in the character of Troy himself, who is so overwhelmed by bitterness that he destroys his son's dream of a college education- a dream that most fathers would happily support. Instead, Troy instructs Cory to learn a trade like carpentry or auto mechanics: "That way you have something can't nobody take away from you" [Wilson, 1986: 35].

Moreover, in the stage directions to *Fences*, Wilson indicates that the legendary "field of dreams" has been reduced to the "small dirt yard" in

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front of Troy's home-his current playing field. Incompletely fenced, the yard contains lumber and other fence-building materials, as well as two oil drums used as garbage containers. A baseball bat – “ the most visible symbol of Troy's deferred dreams” – is propped up against a tree, from which there hangs “ a ball made of rags”. As the setting reveals, Troy does not inhabit a walled garden of timeless youth. At 53, he cannot reclaim his past glory as a power hitter; nor can he participate in the American dream. His playing field has deteriorated into one of dirt, garbage, and rags. Indeed, only after Troy's death at the end of the play, when his fence is completed and when his daughter Raynell plants a small garden in front of the house, is there even a suggestion of a walled paradise. On the whole, *Fences* is unique in that it appropriates a traditionally white cultural form- baseball- in order to portray an African American experience in the twentieth century.

To conclude everything, it should be noticed that in *Fences* such baseball's setting invites stories of mythic confrontation. This baseball's battleground is a kind of a sanctuary for heroes-a space reserved for the bravest and best. In *Fences* Troy sees himself as belonging to this masculine battleground.

Indeed, throughout the play he uses the game of baseball to preserve a heroic self- image. Although his glory days in the Negro Leagues are far behind him, Troy still views himself as the strong man, the indomitable slugger of old. Wilson artfully expresses Troy Maxon's double consciousness- his complicated experience as a black man in a white-dominated world.

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