

# Death and baseball: august wilson's fences



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Along with the Fourth of July and apple pie, baseball is a celebrated symbol of America. Since its invention over 150 years ago, the game has served as a powerful metaphor for the American dream, and the hopes and democratic ideals that accompany this idea. However, in 1957, when August Wilson's *Fences* is set, baseball was still in the early phases of desegregation, a process that had begun ten years before. This racial revolution left Wilson's protagonist, 53-year-old former Negro league star Troy Maxson, resentful of the opportunities he was denied in his own baseball career. Troy's disappointment not only affects his life, but also family's life, in particular, his 18-year-old son, Cory. Based on his outdated assumption that discrimination still exists in sports despite the cultural changes, Troy attempts to protect Cory by denying him a football scholarship and a chance at the American dream. Troy explains his actions entirely through baseball terminology. Troy also relies on baseball imagery to describe an extramarital affair and his relationship with death itself. Using these vivid baseball images and loaded rhetoric, Troy Maxson defies the constraints of racism and the mundaneness of his own life. Consumed with bitterness, Troy dwells on the memories of his former playing days while also attempting to distinguish himself as unique. Having been denied his wish to play baseball professionally, Troy focuses on the main deterrent to his former dreams. In Troy's mind, there is only reason he did not succeed at baseball, and that is his race. After Rose suggests that Troy was simply too old once the baseball color barrier was broken, he says, "What do you mean too old? Don't come telling me I was too old. I just wasn't the right color. Hell, I'm fifty-three years old and can do better than Selkirk's .269 right now!" (39). Troy's clear awareness of the power of race in determining opportunity is the main

source of his discontent. Troy feels the need to single race out, as shown by his use of “just,” to justify his angst. His comparison to the New York Yankees outfielder George Selkirk, an average white player, also demonstrates his desire to make others understand that he was indeed talented enough to be in the major leagues. He goes further in comparing himself favorably to Selkirk, saying, “Man batting .269, understand? .269. What kind of sense that make? I was hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs!” (9). Troy even goes so far as to compare himself to other black baseball players. He notes, “Jackie Robinson wasn’t nobody...Hank Aaron ain’t nobody.” (34) Bringing these legendary African-American players to his own level, Troy suggests that it is truly impossible for any black athlete to be successful in professional, white-controlled sports. These claims, however, seem futile and unjustified coming from the embittered Troy. His repeated use of the word “nobody” also serves to illustrate one of the reasons Troy could never have succeeded in professional baseball, a reason he himself does not recognize. Wilson depicts Troy as headstrong and confrontational with a manner far less conciliatory than would have been necessary to manage the hardships of being black in the Major Leagues in the 1940’s and 1950’s. Troy’s slandering of other players and the racist culture of baseball thus makes him come across as defiant rather than victimized. His prejudice and bitterness affects his son Cory’s baseball career, too. Believing that African-Americans will never be given a fair chance in sports, Troy denies Cory the chance to play college football. The clash between Troy and Cory persists throughout the play. It begins when Cory receives the news that he has been awarded a scholarship to the University of North Carolina. Troy’s immediate reaction to this news is to assume that Cory won’t actually even

get the chance to succeed. Troy says, "The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway." (35) This echoes Troy's own complaints about his baseball career, but his concern for Cory's future is even more acute. Troy groups all sports organizations, or any people with power as the "white man." This generalization shows how disenchanting and prejudiced Troy has become after experiencing so much disappointment in his baseball career. Thus, when his own son receives a chance far superior to any Troy received, he instantly rejects it based on his longstanding fear of exclusion and rejection by those in power. When Rose tries to convince Troy to let Cory play, she explains that Cory is simply trying to be like his father. She says, "Why don't you let the boy go ahead and play football, Troy? Ain't no harm in that. He's just trying to be like you with the sports" (39). The indignant language Troy uses to respond suggests that Rose has hit on a very sensitive topic. For Cory to be exactly like him is precisely what Troy wishes to prevent. Troy says to Rose, "I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get... I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports" (39). Troy's way of protecting and caring for his son is confusing to Rose and infuriating to Cory. In Troy's mind, he is protecting his son from falling victim to his same disappointments. The sports world and baseball have come to represent such evils to Troy that he lets his past shape Cory's future, determined not to allow racism to dictate Cory's life. Wilson leaves it ambiguous why Troy waited until such a late point in Cory's life to stop him from playing sports. This is perhaps because Troy realizes that because Cory plays a different sport in a different time, he might actually have a better chance at success than his father. This clash between

Cory and Troy and eventually renders Cory unable to live in the same house as his father. As Troy moves further and further away from his dream of playing baseball, he starts to meld the playing field with his home life. Troy starts using baseball imagery to direct his family and defy white culture. Wilson describes the play's only setting as " a small dirt yard, partially fenced...A baseball bat leans against a tree." This description suggests that Troy still treats his surroundings like a baseball game. The dirt of the yard provides a field on which to go to battle with whomever he needs, just like he did while playing the real game. Baseball imagery is central to the way Troy makes sense of his world. He describes his attitude towards life to Rose, saying, " You born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate. You got to guard it closely...always looking for the curve-ball on the inside corner" (69). This powerful image shows a defiant Troy as a perpetual fighter in the batter's box of life, striving to earn a decent living in a world that will always discriminate against him. Troy attempts to convey this embattled and truculent mentality to Cory as well, but after learning that Troy has crushed his football prospects, Cory becomes so incensed that he begins to make angry accusations against his father. He says, " Just cause you didn't have a chance! You just scared I'm gonna be better than you, that's all" (58). Full of idealism about the promise of the American dream, Cory's reaction reflects the generational conflict between father and son. In response to Cory's accusation, Troy responds with the same baseball-as-battlefield imagery. He says, " I'm gonna tell you what your mistake was. See...you swung at the ball and didn't hit it. That's strike one. See you in the batter' box now. You swung and you missed. That's strike one. Don't you strike out!" (58) To Troy, baseball is inextricably linked with pain and disappointment. He equates

Cory's failure, with the physical action of missing a pitch, a "strike." This representation of disappointment as a physical action shows the effect that disillusionment and racism have had on Troy's life, as well as how Troy perpetuates this in his parenting decisions. As Cory nears a "strike out," or rather, being kicked out of the household, Troy increasingly merges his baseball imagery with foreboding warnings. Eventually, Cory has a physical fight with Troy and leaves the house, serving as the final strike in Cory's potential sports career. This conflict takes a powerful toll on Troy as well. Shortly before the play's conclusion, Troy directs his baseball rhetoric towards death and his marital conflict to underscore his proud defiance. After exposing his affair to Rose, Troy attempts to justify his actions again using his traditional baseball terminology. He says, "I stood on first base for eighteen years and I thought...well, goddamn it...go on for it!" (70) This explanation provides a window into Troy's character by showing how focused his life had been on being responsible. He assures himself that he was entitled to seek and achieve more because he had been living the same "decent," "useful" life for "eighteen years." It is telling that he uses the "first base" imagery to explain his period of stasis because his baseball career was also stuck. Through this display of pride, the reader can see how important it is for Troy to differentiate himself and to defy his static life. This theme of defiance continues as the play progresses and Troy begins addressing death itself. By linking baseball and death, he convinces himself that he is unconquerable and close to immortal. Troy says about death, "Death ain't nothing. I done seen him. Done wrassled with him. You can't tell me nothing about him. Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner" (10). Troy equates death with a pitch that could he could hit to score

a home-run. This address parallels his disparaging comments about Hank Aaron and Jackie Robinson, in Act I, in that they both demonstrate that Troy wishes to show that he is stronger than his opponents. For Troy, death itself might represent the perpetual oppression of the white man, a force he wishes he could take on and conquer. Eventually, Troy realizes that his "at bat" with death has finally rendered him the loser. In his last speech, Troy addresses death once again, "(Troy assumes a batting posture and begins to taunt Death, the fastball in the outside corner). Come on! It's between you and me now! Come on! Anytime you want! Come on! I be ready for you...but it ain't gonna be easy" (89). Even until his final moments, Troy feels compelled to face death with the same vigor and fearlessness with which he would have faced the legendary black pitcher, Satchel Paige. By utilizing baseball rhetoric at this final moment, Wilson leaves the reader thinking about the nature of the sport, specifically the fact that there can only be one victor. Troy's final speech also leaves the reader with a strong image of the protagonist as a warrior who remained resolute and defiant until his final hour. In the final scene of the play, as the entire Maxson family gathers to commemorate Troy, his brother Gabriel, in the figurative form of the Archangel Gabriel, says, "You ready, Troy. I'm gonna tell St. Peter to open the gates. You get ready now" (100). As Gabriel sends Troy off through the Gates of Heaven, it becomes clear through the use of "You get ready now," that he recognizes and respects Troy's defiant character, as reflected by his language. No matter how many wrongs Troy committed in his life, he will ultimately be remembered for his strength in the face of adversity and oppression. With the whole family at the house, Troy's home and real playing fields are consecrated, and the great man who never stopped swinging is

forgiven and celebrated. August Wilson's *Fences* is unique because it takes a traditionally white activity, baseball, and uses it to portray the African-American experience. Through Troy, Wilson craftily expresses a black man's complex awareness of being an outsider in a white society. At the same time, this approach serves to contradict the standard image of the wholesome American dream. Wilson suggests that America's national pastime has been tarnished with racism and thus the idealistic promise of America is an illusion as well. The playwright instead indicates, that the image of baseball, and the nation as a whole, must accept the increasing role of the Troy Maxsons of the world, the proud, defiant, African-American fighters who are just as deserving of the American Dream.