Reading Sport Critically: Baseball and the Disruption of the Myth of the American Dream in August Wilson's Fences

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Abstract

Since the turn of the 20th century, baseball has been a reliable source of inspiration for authors and literary scholars. The exciting world of the game appears as a motif in literature, and functions in various implicit and explicit degrees as theme, as symbol, as structure, as reference, and as metaphor. This paper is an investigation into sports literature where the world of sport encounters and intersects with the world of literature to form a critical lens through which we can examine and understand the concept of the American Dream as one of the crucial components of American culture. As a quintessential American sport, baseball reflects the miscellaneous contradictions and dichotomies existing within the American society. In baseball we can see the disparity between the democratic principles of the American Dream and racial discrimination. Despite those professed democratic principles, African American athletes faced restrictions; they were either relegated to the background or prevented altogether from participation, and the baseball institution is a case in point. Such contradictions form a flagrant disregard for the very principles upon which athletics has been based: fair play, meritocracy, and egalitarianism. Sheer talent and on-field achievement are supposed to determine one's place in sports, not ethnic background or skin color.

In his play Fences, African American playwright August Wilson deconstructs the myth of the American Dream shaking the very foundations of the social and cultural assumptions associated with that myth. He explores black Americans' thwarted dreams and deflected hopes using baseball as a symbol of America and a

drama from Eugene O'Neill until now attests to this observation; African American playwright August Wilson (1945-2005) is no exception in this respect. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, Fences (1987), Wilson explores black Americans' athletic experience and their thwarted dreams and deflected hopes using baseball as a symbol of America and a metaphor for the American Dream. Throughout the play, he disrupts and deconstructs the myth of the American Dream by revealing institutional racism within the baseball establishment during the first half of the 20th century. This disruption is meant to rupture, shake, and call into question the whole concept of the American Dream and to test and scrutinize its miscellaneous aspects. Moreover, inherent in the very idea of deconstruction is the need to analyze historically, reconsider, revisit, rethink, and reassess. Wilson reveals that the game failed to fulfill its potential as an integrative force or as an essential means of assimilation for ethnic athletes into mainstream American culture. Thus, baseball challenges the legitimacy of the American Dream and subverts some of the mythologized views that lie at the very heart of the concept.

Historically, baseball, in one form or another, has existed in the United States for over one hundred and fifty years. Since its invention in the early-nineteenth century, the game has become America's most mythologized sport, and its players have been idolized by baseball fans who saw them as national heroes, role models, and cultural icons. As an indigenous social institution, baseball serves as a microcosm of the much broader American culture. To Americans, baseball is not just a game played, but an integral part of the country's national history, culture, and social consciousness. Emphasizing the multifunctional role that baseball plays in the American culture, historian Peter Pjarkman explains that "baseball is a game which surely does not mean half of the things we take it to

mean. But then again, it probably means so much more" (qtd. in Elias, "Fit" 3). Surprisingly, writer Gerald Early is of the opinion that baseball, along with the American Constitution and jazz music, will be the cultural phenomenon for which America will be remembered two thousand years from now (qtd. in Early, "The First Inning").

As a quintessential American game, baseball was seen by many as America's national pastime. Accordingly, the game and its ideology captures the very essence of the American national experience and epitomizes the finest and the most genuine values of both the older rural and the newer urban America: agrarianism; love of the wilderness; individuality; sense of equality and fair play; and obsession with money, wealth and stardom. Baseball plays a pivotal role in inculcating and spreading those values among its players, spectators, and fans. Moreover, because of its long history and mythic status, baseball is so closely and heavily involved in almost every important social, historical, and cultural development in American history that it is really difficult to imagine those developments without the country's national game. As a result, the game can be used as a cultural barometer valid for the exploration of hot and debatable issues that are very significant to the discourses of American culture: race, class, gender, and national identity. The study of this intersectionality of baseball with those controversial issues is a useful history lesson through which two hundred years of American history can be examined and illuminated.

A number of scholars have suggested that baseball may be perceived as a sort of mirror or prism capable of reflecting or refracting American culture. In his book God's Country and Mine: A Declaration of Love Spiced with a Few Harsh words, (1954) philosopher Jacques Barzun urged all who wanted to know the American character to study baseball, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball" (159). As an all-

American game, baseball is seen by many as the perfect expression of the American Dream and all its large components. Bart Giamatti claims that baseball is "the last pure place where Americans can dream" (qtd. in Elias, "Fit" 9). John Thorn, one of the editors of Total Baseball: The Ultimate Baseball Encyclopedia, argues that "fundamentally, baseball is what America is not, but has longed or imagined itself to be...more than anything else, baseball is about hope and renewal" (3). The analogy between the ideology of the game and the various aspects of the American dream is obvious. Baseball is reflective of the principles of meritocracy, equality, objectivity, democracy, individuality, hard work, and pastoralism. Technically, the very design of the game reflects the principle of individuality. Unlike soccer, basketball, or American football, baseball is about the individual. In the other sports mentioned, when the ball is kicked into the net or thrown into the hoop, it is the ball which does the scoring. In baseball, it is the individual who scores. (In baseball a batter scores when he gets to first base, second pace or third base) Moreover, the game incarnates the principle of democracy and justice through fair arbitration. Baseball also attests to the values of hard work, merit, and talent as the only determinants of self-worth and success. On the supposedly objective and colorblind baseball field, social rank, ethnic superiority, skin color, or birth privilege do not count; sheer talent, heroic effort, and professional achievement determine worth. Actually, post-integration baseball history is full of the names of colored players for whom baseball was a ladder of mobility that enabled them to leave the poor ghettos in the Deep South. For example, Jackie Robinson, the first African American to cross the color barrier and to compete in the major leagues in 1947, was the grandson of a slave and the son of a sharecropper.

As a historical mirror reflective of social, cultural, and political conflicts, baseball constitutes a perfect site for the exploration of the dialectical issue of race and power relations between blacks and whites in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The game highlights the fundamental racial dilemma African Americans have confronted, and reveals that the story of African American ballplayers' attempts to integrate and desegregate baseball and to assimilate into mainstream American culture is the story of perseverance and indefatigable quest for racial equality in a white-dominated culture.

Historically, in the American sporting industry in the middle of the nineteenth century, racism persisted in Major League baseball. In 1867, the National Association of Base Ball Players, the sport's governing body, voted not to accept a team with black athletes. Such a segregationist dictum erected an insurmountable fence that kept blacks out of organized baseball. It is true that baseball historians cannot confirm that there was a written document barring black players from professional baseball, yet, there existed a 'gentlemen's agreement' among the team owners in the major leagues that expelled all colored players from professional baseball. This pernicious unwritten agreement was as binding as any written law. Consequently, by the turn of the 20th century, black baseball players were entirely excluded from playing all-white major league baseball that used to represent the highest level of baseball competition. Instead, they competed against each other in the Negro Leagues. This situation continued until 1946 when Jackie Robinson played for the Brooklyn Dodgers to become the first African American to play in the major leagues. However, this integrationist step did not mean that white team owners believed in equality; those were interested in baseball as an investment and were only after winning games, making money, and courting black fans.

Baseball has produced a body of fine literature: essays, poetry, fiction, drama, and journalism, and some of America's most

celebrated literary masters and intellectuals like Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Robert Frost, John Updike, Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, to mention only a few, have written about baseball as a symbol of American life. Inspired by the game, those writers have seen in the institution of baseball both the potentials and the limits of the American Dream.

In his play Fences, Wilson employed black experience in the institution of baseball to reveal the hollowness and the false promise of the American Dream. He disrupts the conventionally mythologized and romanticized idyllic vision of the American Dream and challenges its credibility by disclosing the institutional racism within the baseball establishment before and during the initial integration period. Artistically, baseball, or more specifically the black experience in the national pastime, provided Wilson with a convenient social, political, and historical context that enabled him to study American culture and to illuminate the racial reality of that culture.

Contextually, Fences is set in Pittsburgh in 1957, just before the advent of the Civil Rights Movement and ten years after Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play Major league Baseball in 1947. This time element is significant as it accounts for the overwhelming feelings of bitterness, frustration, and rage that most of the characters in the play have towards the white community that confined them and restricted their opportunities. Additionally, by setting his play at the time before the Civil Rights Movement, Wilson emphasizes the fact that racism is an integral part of the play's discourse and that it plays a pivotal role in affecting every character's stance and situation in the play.

Fences tells the story of Troy Maxon, a former spectacular professional baseball player and a talented athlete. Troy's great skill on the field never received the attention or recognition it actually

deserved because racial bias then pushed aside black players from playing major league baseball. Those banned black baseball players were allowed to compete only in the Negro Leagues. When the play opens, Troy is a 53-year-old garbage collector in Pittsburg. This means that he was in his early forties when Major League Baseball was first integrated in 1947 when Jackie Robinson became the first black player in the Major League. Unfortunately, at that time of integration Troy was sentenced to spend 15 years in jail for robbery and murder, and he was already in his mid-thirties when he got out of prison. During the fifteen years he spent in jail he learned how to play baseball and became an accomplished player. However, after he was released, he was, as his wife Rose remarks, "too old to play" in the newly-integrated major leagues and benefit from the historic step taken by Jackie Robinson. Troy cannot accept, however, that his age, along with his color, was a key factor in expelling him from the major leagues and he rages angrily, "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 .296 right now!" (40). Troy's bitterness about his failed dream that has 'festered' and 'crusted over', to quote Hughes's verse, blinds his eyes to the potentials and possibilities that were opened before black players in 1957 and that enabled them to participate in white dominated major leagues.

Troy is embittered about the opportunities denied or lost because of the color of his skin. Using baseball jargon to debate the possibility of racial equality in baseball, he believes that if you are a black man in America, "you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate...Everything lined up against you" (66). Mary Bogumil reads Troy's resentment as a means to prove his equality with or superiority to contemporary players of both races: "if it were not for the lack of opportunity and now his age, Troy believes that he

would have been the best player ever to play the game" (39-40). From a present stance, Troy reminisces about his past experience as a legendary hitter in the Negro Leagues with a lot of bitterness and resentment that he, as a black man, has fallen from grace and has been locked out of Major League Baseball and its money, glamour, and stardom despite his athletic prowess. Alluding to Troy's past athletic ability and his by-gone glorious days of hitting homeruns on the ballpark, Bono, Troy's best friend, says, "Ain't but two men ever played baseball as good as you. That's Babe Ruth and Josh Gibson. Them's the only two men ever hit more home runs than you". To this Troy responds regretfully by saying, "What it ever get me? Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of" (15).

In Fences, Wilson does not provide much documentary information about the history of black baseball leagues that began in America in the years following the Civil War in 1865, yet this history of baseball forms the background against which he weaves the fabric of his drama. For example, he did not mention in a straightforward way anything about the unwritten pernicious "gentlemen's Agreement" which was made in 1890 among the team owners within the major and minor leagues. Neither did he refer to the bad economic conditions nor the difficulties black players faced in the negro leagues: itinerant lifestyle, low wages, bad transportation, shabby hotel conditions, racial and ethnic slurs and abuse from fanatic fans, ethnic stereotypes by segregationist and discriminatory journalists. However, baseball supplied Wilson with a structural frame that enabled him to portray the life of his lead character, Troy Maxon, and to reveal his strengths and weaknesses; his triumphs and defeats. Troy's life is viewed and refracted through the prism of his brief athletic experience in baseball. Additionally, baseball provided an excellent cultural and

historical background against which the racial conflict between blacks and whites is revealed.

Structurally, Fences is made up of two acts divided into nine scenes. This particular structure emphasizes the close connection between the drama and the game of baseball which is divided into nine innings. Moreover, Baseball serves as a metaphor for Troy's life which is also divided into innings or rounds in some of which he wins and in others he is defeated. The innings that represent his triumphs include his early eminent position as a legendary slugger in the Negro Leagues, his successful protest at work that wins him promotion as the first black truck driver, his imaginary fearless confrontations with death, and his noble and responsible efforts to provide for his family devotedly. Conversely, there are other situations that reveal Troy's weaknesses and represent his defeats: his tense relationship with his father, his imprisonment, his misunderstandings and painful scuffles with his two sons, his cheating on his wife, his drunkenness, his flamboyant affair with Aberta, his institutionalization of his brain-damaged brother, his betrayed and failed dreams, and finally his being vanquished by death. Troy's victories are compared to "homeruns," those terrific hits over the fence to outside the park, whereas his defeats are compared to "strike-outs" those that occur when the batter fails to hit the ball thrown by the pitcher or when he hits it into foul territory and, as a result, he is sent out of the game.

Additionally, Troy is so obsessed with baseball that he can only think of life in baseball terms. For Troy, baseball is his raison d'être and his life is nothing but a baseball game. It is baseball that gave him status and gave his life meaning, guidance and direction. It is baseball that provided him with an opportunity to emerge from a life of crime, despair and aimlessness. Throughout the play, it has become clear that thanks to baseball Troy could find himself again

despite the bitterness and the frustration he feels about his pre-integration athletic experience.

Troy's athletic experience casts heavy shadows of doubt and mistrust on the promises of the American Dream, thus belying all claims of justice and equal opportunity. African Americans were neither invited nor welcomed to participate in the pursuit of the American Dream, and they were sent to the margins of the American society. In his preface to Fences, Wilson reveals the color line that used to exist in the North:

> The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation....They came strong, eager, searching. The city re jected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tar paper. They collected rags and wood. They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies. They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream. That they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. (xix)

For African Americans the American Dream faded, dwindled and proved a big lie. Simultaneously and in terms of the notion of the great melting pot that constitutes an established component of the American Dream, Blacks did not melt in the American melting pot in which people of all cultures and races should have commingled and blended, thus proving the widespread assumption of the great American melting pot to be a mere inapplicable lie, and the traditional myth of the American Dream a false unattainable illusion. Reverend Jesse Jackson eloquently explains, "They talk about America being a melting pot, but it is more like a vegetable soup and we've been

pushed down to the bottom of the pot. We are going to come up and be recognized or turn the pot over" (67-68).

Troy's obsession with baseball is evident in his adoption of the game's jargon as his only frame of reference. At one point he indignantly refers to the sting of racism that he tasted, "You born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate" (66). Referring to his precarious financial situation after long years of hard work, he describes himself as "standing on first base" (66). In referring to his affair with Alberta, Troy says that he "wants to go down swinging" (66). He tries to justify this flamboyant extramarital love relation by equating it with trying to "steal second" (66). Revealing the heroic and defiant side of his personality and showing that he is not daunted by mortality, Troy imagines himself wrestling with death. He compares the drama of fighting with death to the breath-holding conflict in a baseball match, "Death is a fastball on the outside corner," boasts Troy (16). Baseball is so substantially a part of Troy's life that he clings to it even at the time of his death. Troy dies while batting the rag ball he has tied to a tree in the yard as a means of retaining his terrific skills and clinging to idyllic bygone days. The bat and the baseball are symbols of his sway, power, and masculinity. Moreover, baseball provides Troy with an excellent opportunity to defy restrictive social structures and to avenge himself on those who have wronged him, assassinated his dreams, and thwarted his ambitions. Now and again he backlashes against white baseballers belittling their athletic abilities and professional achievements: "Selkirk! That's it! Man batting .269, understand? .269. What kind of sense that make? I was hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs! Man batting .269and playing right field for the Yankees!" (16).

In Fences Wilson examines institutional racism within the baseball establishment. This racism, Wilson believes, is one of the forces that contaminated, if not destroyed, that idyll associated with

the American Dream and its baseball metaphor. He also critiques this dichotomy between theory and practice existing within the American personality, and the disparity between the American Dream and the black experience in baseball. The American Dream has proudly professed the great principles of democracy and equality, and promised African Americans the full embrace of that dream. Conversely, schizophrenic America practiced the very opposite of those self-proclaimed principles; it failed to implement and substantiate the elements of that dream in action, and blocked the road before blacks to attain it.

Theoretically, athletic ability, not color or ethnicity, should determine who should play baseball and who should not. However, throughout the play, the baseball arena is portrayed as an uneven prejudiced site which is stigmatized by racism. This reveals the delusion and the fallacy of the traditional claims to meritocracy, objectivity, neutrality, and color-blindness upon which the baseball diamond is supposedly and traditionally built. Additionally, Troy's experience challenges and belies the commonly held belief that sport plays an important role in placing people on an equal footing. Troy's astonishing athletic prowess fulfilled him nothing of the promises of the American Dream. On the contrary, he was relegated to the lowest rung of the social ladder. After eighteen years of struggle and hard work, he is left poor, impoverished, and economically disadvantaged. Ironically, the terrific baseball superstar eventually ends up working as a garbage collector at the sanitation department picking up trash for nickels and dimes. Pathetically enough, Troy depends on his brain-damaged brother's money for financial assistance. He admits that he would not even have had a roof over his head to protect him and his family had it not been for the $3000 disability checks that the government gave to his mentally disabled brother, Gabriel, who had a

serious head injury in World War II. Troy laments to his wife, "If my brother didn't have that metal plate in his head…I wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I'm fifty-three years old" (31). Defending himself before his wife and assuring that he did all he could to support his family, however, he has been leading from hand to mouth existence, Troy announces, "I do the best I can do. I come 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 pocket. I give you my sweat and blood. I ain't got no tears. I done spent them" (40). Troy's attempt to resort to and engage in the world of sport as a means to combat and overcome racism proved to be counterproductive. Ironically, he found himself running towards the very thing from which he sought to escape, that is, bigotry, discrimination, and racism.

In Fences, Wilson uses the play's literary discourse to create a "subversive narrative" (Shannon, Fences 20) or a reverse image that challenges and demythologizes all the traditional romanticized assumptions associated with the American Dream and its baseball metaphor. At the very core of the drama lies the question of whether the American Dream is equally accessible to all citizens of the country and whether all groups get to participate equally in the attainment of the American Dream. Throughout Troy's terrific storytelling about the racial past, Wilson constitutes a counter-narrative; an oppositional alternative reading of both the institution of baseball and the American Dream from an African American perspective. Wilson's motive is to expose the racism that used to encompass the national pastime and to reveal that the American Dream has been far beyond the reach of people of ethnic origins. At one point in the play Troy recounts that he recently saw the daughter of Negro League outstanding hitter Josh Gibson "walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet." He then angrily compares the fate of Gibson's child to the fate of the child of

Selkirk, a white major league player who played for the Yankees, and concludes, "I bet you Selkirk's daughter ain't walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet" (12). Troy's message is apparent: economic inequalities prevail in baseball. Again, the baseball diamond is not a fair terrain; it is a prejudiced site that rewards the inferior at the expense of the apt and the eminent.

Thematically, Fences is more than a simplistic story of racial oppression and victimization. It is a social realistic drama in which Wilson conceives of different ways to dramatize the devastating effect of racism and inequality on Africa-American consciousness as well as on the construction of black families. The family life of the protagonist Troy Maxon has been very much disturbed by his racist experience in baseball. What Wilson seems to suggest is that the feeling of bitterness and rage that results from the sting of bigotry and racism creeps into the life of black families and tears them apart; it severs all emotional bonds and affinities that might exist between father and son or between husband and wife.

Troy's troubled relationship with his family members (his refusal to sign the permission papers for his son to get a scholarship and play college football, his unfaithfulness to his wife) has been very much caused and defined by the trials and tribulations he faced during his painful pre-integration athletic experience. The sting of racism and lack of social opportunity that Troy had experienced created a tense and combustible relationship between him and his younger son, Cory; spoiled his marital relation and alienated him from his wife, Rose; and played a critical role in defining and molding his outlook on life in general. Throughout the play, the Maxon family is portrayed as a ruptured and fractured dysfunctional family full of clashes and fights as a direct result of the racist victimization and oppression to which Troy, the head of the family, has been exposed. This victimization

leads Troy to turn on his own family and to exercise his power on those helpless people around him: his children and his wife.

In order to explore and analyze the real reasons for the inflammable relationship between Troy and his son, Cory, it has to be admitted that Troy has a handful of complicated and inextricably linked motives. The core of the father-son conflict is that both men share a deep passion for sport, Troy for baseball, and Cory for football, yet each of them belongs to a different generation and different sports times. As a result, Troy and Cory hold different and incompatible opinions over a changing sports history. Like his father, Cory has a dream; he is a promising 17-year-old high school football star with aspirations and ambitions to become a college star. Because of living in the sixties, a decade that witnessed the birth of the Civil Rights movement and carried a lot of hope for blacks, Cory belongs to a younger generation that has witnessed the integration and the desegregation of sports; his dream has not been deferred or slighted; it has not festered. Still believing in the possibility of the attainment of the American Dream and having both the talent and determination to achieve his dream, Cory looks at the present with a lot of optimism seeing it as a changing and more accepting place for talented black athletes. He recognizes that he has a lot of opportunities- social, educational, and financial- that are held open before him and that were not available to his father. Troy, on the other hand, grew up in the first half of the century and is left disillusioned by the false promises of the American Dream. He judges the present in light of his negative past experience and does not expect college football to give his son a better treatment than that he received from major league baseball. In fact, Troy looks at the white dominated world of sport that discriminated against blacks for so long with a lot of skepticism, apprehension, and mistrust, and he wants to transfer this view on to his son in order to spare him from a fate like his own. Susan Koprince cites Troy's

negative athletic experience when evaluating Troy's decision to prevent his son from playing football and sees him as partially justified:

> There is a certain method, however, to Troy's madness, for why should he expect college football (another white power structure) to treat his son any better than major-league baseball treated him? Why should he believe, in 1957, that times have really changed for black men? (354-55)

Troy is too stubborn to see beyond his own athletic experience and to admit the change that took place in society in general and the sports field in particular as the following exchange between him and his wife reveals:

> Troy, why don't you admit you was too old to in the major leagues? For once...why don't you admit that? ...Times have changed from when you was young, Troy. People change. Te world's changing around you and you can't even see it. (40)

Troy's stubbornness to admit change results in his adamant and foolish decision to refuse to meet the college coach who comes from North Carolina to see Cory play football and ask for Troy's permission to recruit Cory for a college football scholarship. While everyone encourages Cory, embittered Troy refuses to sign the consent form, thus destroying his son's dreams of college education, athletic opportunity, money, and stardom.

> Rose: Why don't you let the boy go ahead and play football, Troy? Ain't no harm in that. He's just tying to be like you with the sports.
> Troy: 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. (39-40)

When Cory begs him to change his mind, Troy replies:

> The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. 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. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage. (37)

Ostensibly, Troy's overwhelming bitterness, with its concomitant feelings of pain, anger, frustration and disillusionment, leads him to adopt an antagonistic attitude towards the whole world around him. However, instead of venting his anger on his white oppressors, he displaces his rage and turns his frustrations and his wrath towards his family members. Underscoring the futility and counterproductivity of Troy's anger, critic Kim Pereira argues, "In venting his anger on athletics, Troy is actually turning against himself...he attacks the source of his identity and, in seeking self-empowerment as a free human being, becomes a slave to bitterness" (41). Being constantly confronted with problems of survival, Troy becomes more and more psychologically abusive to his family members. His fights and confrontations with his younger son, Cory, seem to be a means of releasing the tensions and frustrations resulting from his prohibition from the Major Leagues. There is also an undertone that Troy cannot get himself to accept the idea of his younger son surpassing him in the very world of sport wherein he failed. Cory says to his father: "Just 'cause you didn't have a chance! You just scared I'm gonna be better than you, that's all" (54).

Troy's tenuous relationship with his son escalates into sheer physical confrontations wherein father and son violently fight as if in a baseball contest, and Troy's front yard is transformed into a battlefield. The conflict reaches its climax in ACT TWO, SCENE 4

where defiant Cory blames his father for cheating on Cory's mother, for disappointing Cory, and for exploiting and mismanaging the money of his brain-damaged brother, Gabriel. Troy physically attacks Cory who retaliates by grabbing the baseball bat and swinging at his father. Cory swings twice but misses, and Troy seizes the bat away from Cory thus denying his son the third swing that may have resulted in Cory's decisive victory or a strike-out, to use baseball jargon. Proving himself to be stronger than his son, Troy stands over Cory with the bat and then drives him out of the house.

Christine Birdwell reads this heated confrontation as an ironic version of the all-American father-and-son game of catch, "Wilson presents a reverse image of the traditional, treasured father-and-son backyard game depicted in films and on television. Instead, father and son vie for the bat transformed into a weapon, and savage combat erupts" (91). What Birdwell suggests is that Wilson parodies and disrupts the mythologized image of the game of baseball that exaggerates the emotional connection and the affinity between fathers and sons. The image of fathers playing catch with their sons in the backyard forms a durable trope in all representations of the American Dream as well as baseball. Associated with this illusory and rosy image are a handful of cherished values: the passing on of skills from one generation to the next, an affectionate father-son relationship, and the joyful passing away of summer hours. Paradoxically, baseball, because of being tainted by racism and because of being played and run by imperfect racist people, brought hatred and discord between father and son; baseball alienated Cory and sent him away from his father's house. Troy dies without having ever to see Cory again.

Similarly, Troy's kind-hearted wife, Rose, got burnt by her husband's bitterness and rage, and their marital relationship has been very much shaped and negatively affected by his past baseball

experience. As he did with Cory, Troy takes out his anger, disappointment, and hostility on his faithful and devoted wife, from whom he alienates himself by committing cheating and adultery. Whereas the father-son conflict takes the shape of sheer physical confrontations, Rose suffers emotionally from her husband's abusive treatment. Troy and Rose have been married for more than eighteen years. During that time, she has been a very faithful, supportive, and dutiful wife who sacrifices her life for the sake of her husband and her family, "I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams…and I buried them inside you," explains Rose (67). However, Troy breaks this spiritual bond and cheats on his wife by having an extra-marital affair with a "big-legged Florida gal" called Alberta. Toward the end of the play, when Alberta becomes pregnant with Raynell, Troy tells Rose about the affair and the impending birth. Six months later, Alberta dies during childbirth. Troy finds no other option but to bring home his daughter and to ask Rose to take care of her, a motherly task that she accepts, but she tells Troy that the physical and spiritual bond that used to unite them together no longer exists, "I'll take care of your baby for you…From right now…this child got a mother. But you a womanless man" (74).

Throughout his life, Troy has been trying his best to bring meaning and significance to his life, but in vain. He tried to find solace in drinking, in singing the blues, in telling stories, in establishing a family, and most importantly in playing baseball. However, all these efforts failed to bring him any lasting comfort or consolation. With this conception in mind, Troy's extra-marital affair with Alberta can be looked at as an attempt on Troy's part to fill in the spiritual void in his life. He tries to open up a new dimension in his life and to bring meaning to that life of frustration and unfulfillment through love and sexuality. Additionally, this flamboyant affair can be read as an attempt to escape from a dull stifling existence and a

monotonous family life full of restrictions, worries, and pressures. Describing the monotony of an everyday family life, Troy tells his wife:

> 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. We go upstairs in that room at night...and I fall down on you and try to blast a hole into forever. I get up Monday morning...find my lunch on the table. I go out. Make my way. Find my strength to carry me through to the next Friday...that's all I got, Rose. (40)

As the only provider and breadwinner for his family, Troy shoulders a lot of burdens and familial responsibilities and feels it is his right to have some comfort that he tries to find in his extra-marital affair. Troy explains, "I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and the problems...be a different man. I ain't got to wonder how I'm gonna pay the bill and get the roof fixed. I can just be a part of myself that I never been" (65). Aberta seems to be less demanding and less confining and restrictive than Rose who wants to fence her husband inside the house and asks him to build a protective fence around that house in order to keep the people she loves safe inside. With Alberta Troy imagines that can forget all his family obligations and can have rest and joy, "I just want to have a little time to myself...a little time to enjoy life" (69). Vindicating himself and explaining to Rose why he cheated on her, Troy says: "It's just...She gives me a different idea...a different understanding about myself. I can sit up in her house and laugh. Do you understand what I'm saying. I can laugh out loud ...and feels good. I reaches all the way down to the bottom of my shoes...I can't give that up" (65). From another perspective, Troy's love affair is an attempt to escape from a mundane

restrictive reality into the old beautiful days of youth when he was in his prime. At the age of 53, Troy is too old to play baseball, but he believes he is not too old to flirt with women or to be attractive to them. Christine Birdwell explains that Alberta "returns Troy to baseball's yesteryears, in which, according to Bono, 'a lot of them old gals was after [him],' when he 'had the pick of the litter'' (92).

In trying to pacify his wife and vindicate himself against charges of infidelity, Troy, as usual, uses baseball metaphors and imagery as the only language he masters. For example, he refers to his affair with Alberta saying that he "wants to go down swinging," and he compares this love relationship to a base runner's desire to steal second: "Then when I saw the gal…she firmed up my backbone. And I got to thinking that if I tried…I just might be able to steal second. Do you understand after eighteen years I wanted to steal second" (66). Believing that the baseball analogy is inappropriate, Rose replies, " We're not talking about baseball. We're talking about going off to lay in bed with another woman…and then bring it home to me. That's what we're taking about. We ain't talking about no baseball" (65-66).

Troy Maxon is not the only character in the play whose dreams and ambitions have been thwarted by white America. In order to intensify and generalize the theme of betrayed dreams among members of the black community, Wilson has created the character of Gabriel, Troy's disabled brother, who receives a head injury during World War II. This accident requires a metal plate be surgically implanted into his brain and leaves him mentally retarded. As a result of his mental impairment and feeblemindedness, Gabriel carries an old battered trumpet around his waist and is convinced he is Archangel Gabriel, whose task is to blow the trumpet in order to open the Pearly gates of Heaven on Judgment Day and to chase away hell hounds. Despite his mental derangement, Gabriel plays an important role in the fictive world of the drama.

First, Gabriel's fate reveals the injustice that white America did to its black citizens who made an outstanding contribution to winning the war. As a black veteran of the Second World War, Gabriel gave his life and his service to his country during the war and lost part of his brain in that war. He fought shoulder to shoulder with his white fellow citizens. Ironically, in return for that great sacrifice, America compensates Gabriel only with "lousy three thousand dollars," as Troy puts it (31). Ironically, America was fighting fascism outside the country in Europe while tolerating segregation at home, a fact that reveals the schizophrenic nature of the American personality. Gabriel's brother, Troy, was blocked from playing baseball in the Major Leagues just because of the color of his skin while his brother was dying for his country. The social statement that Wilson seems to be making about war is that America is a country of double standards; it treats blacks as second class citizens and is not willing to reciprocate their services and sacrifices in the form of civil services or social recognition.

Second, Gabriel's presence in the play forms a constant reminder to Troy of Troy's own powerlessness as a victimized black man who wavers on the verge of destitution. It is a slap on Troy's face and an affront to his manhood, pride, and self-image to use the money that his mentally impaired brother got from the army as compensation for his war injuries to buy a house for his family, "If my brother didn't have that metal plate in his head...I wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of it. And I'm fifty-three years old. Now see if you can understand that," laments ashamed Troy to his wife (31).

Third, the character of Gabriel has been delineated after the wise fools in Shakespearean drama. Those fools seem naïve, nonsensical, and mentally deranged, however, their words as well as

their actions exude wisdom and insight. Those seemingly mentally impaired individuals have a prophetic vision that enables them to see, know, and predict things that their mental superiors are ignorant of. As Sandra Shannon explains, "Each encounter with Gabriel convinces one to look beyond his surface disability and concentrate instead upon his spiritual and mythical worlds he creates and the realms of possibility that these worlds offer" (Shannon, Dramatic Vision 113). With this conception in mind, Gabriel's role in the drama has not to be interpreted realistically but symbolically and metaphorically. For example, Gabriel is a Christ-like figure; a redeemer and a savior. The wounds and injuries he received in World War II resemble those of Jesus Christ when crucified. Gabriel, in spite of his disability, plays an important role in the black community. In ACT ONE, SCENE 2 he is depicted as wandering around the Maxon family's neighborhood singing, dancing, and performing ritualistic actions believing himself to be angel Gabriel. He also "*carries a chipped basket with an assortment of discarded fruits and vegetables he has picked up in the strip district, and which he attempts to sell* (28). Gabriel's practice of salvaging defective and rotten fruits from the garbage dumpsters identifies him as a redeemer figure. Symbolically, those discarded fruits and vegetables represent the black people who are discriminated against and who feel underestimated and humiliated by the white dominated society. Those blacks have fallen from grace and have been prevented from realizing the American Dream. By selling these fruits and vegetables to the black community, Gabriel is restoring blacks their value as dignified humans and is rescuing them from humiliation and oblivion. Furthermore, he tries to open their eyes to their real value and to make them believe in themselves and in their true self worth.

So far, Wilson has succeeded in challenging and deconstructing the mythologized and idyllic view of the American

Dream and in refuting its false promises. He used Troy's pre-integration athletic experience as well as his family relations to disrupt the traditional mythic image of America as an idyllic land of dreams. One more strategy to challenge the American Dream and its baseball metaphor and to reveal their limits is to parody the romanticized image of the baseball field which is traditionally drawn as an Edenic garden.

Played on a wide lush green ballpark, baseball is an indigenous rural game. The pastoral nature of the sport's early years is reflected in the various names used to refer to the playing areas: "parks," "fields," or "grounds." Besides, the ideology of the game represents an aspiration to a defeated and frustrated innocence, and reflects many of the most genuine and the finest qualities of older America, qualities that had originated and developed on the frontier or in the countryside but now lost: hard work, meritocracy, perseverance, and egalitarianism. Nostalgically, the ballpark is looked at as a piece of land cut off from the frontier and transferred to the cities, a rural preindustrial garden that exists no more. For both baseballers and fans, baseball with its green field represents an escape from the filth and confinement of city life and a return to beautiful nature, simple life, peacefulness, purity, and innocence, things that have been suffocated and stifled amidst the corrupting city influences. As Edgar and Sklansky observe:

> As the nation drifted away from its Jeffersonian ideals—abandoning the farm and crowding into cities, using and abusing capitalism to achieve material wealth at the cost of fair play, and suffering through defeat and poverty—the baseball field marked a small area where such dreams seemed possible once more. (13-14)

Thus, baseball achieves its mythical and metaphorical status as a symbol of bygone simpler times and as a game that incarnates and reflects a beautiful old irretrievable past.

In order to highlight Troy's fall from grace and his exclusion from the American Arcadia symbolized by the ballpark, Wilson presents a reverse image of the romanticized, idyllic earthly paradise much cherished by the American people. Disrupting and challenging this mythologized image of Eden on earth, Wilson, in his stage directions, draws a ridiculous picture of the baseball field. Introducing the setting of the play, Wilson writes:

> The setting is the yard which fronts the only entrance to the Maxon household....The yard is a small dirty yard, partially fenced (except during the last scene), with a wooden sawhorse, a pile of lumber, and other fence-building equipment off to the side. Opposite is a tree from which hangs a ball made of rags. A baseball bat leans against the tree. Two oil drums serve as garbage receptacles and sit near the house at right to complete the setting. (xix)

As the setting and the stage props reveal, Troy is not living in a fenced garden of everlasting youth, beauty, and idyllic bliss. His is a dystopia; a dirty dilapidated yard full of debris, garbage, and rags. Troy, the Adam of this grotesque Eden image, is no longer a young man; he is an aged man of fifty three, broken and defeated by his age and by his inability to fulfill the promises of the American Dream. As a reminder of the reversal of fortune in Troy's life and situation, the setting contains both the baseball bat and the garbage containers; Troy has been expelled from Eden, and his fate has changed from a terrific baseball star to a garbage collector. As a nostalgic reminder of the old bygone days of the frontier, the sawhorse, as one of the stage props, parodies and ridicules the real horses of the western frontiers.

Troy's front yard which has been transformed into a battlefield during his confrontations with his son and wife also becomes the place that witnesses his death. Even in his death, Troy holds tightly on to his past image as a legendary baseball slugger. At the end of the ply Rose

describes to Cory how Troy has died as a heroic figure and as a powerful batter:

> Ain't too much changed. He still got that piece of rag tied to that tree. He was out here swinging that bat. I was just ready to go back in the house. He swung that bat and bat and then he just fell over. Seem like he swung it and stood there with this grin on his face...and then he just fell over. (86-87)

In the final scene, Troy's playing field is portrayed as a sanctuary in which members of the Maxon family gather in what resembles a family reunion in order to cherish the memories of deceased Troy. Cory comes back from the Marines the day of his father's funeral. After an absence of seven years he comes home intending to challenge his father even after his death by refusing to attend his funeral. However, after the interference of Rose who asks him to let go his anger, Cory decides to throw the past behind his back and to skip over the emotional fence that separated him from his father. He forgives his father and agrees to go to the funeral. He shares the memories of his father's life and death with his mother and his seven-year-old sister, Raynell, as if at a memorial ceremony. Troy and Raynell sing a song that Troy received from his father about Troy's boyhood dog, Old Blue, which died and went to the Promised Land. The song is a cultural legacy of the Maxon family; it was originally created by Troy's father and passed on through Troy to Cory and Raynell. After they finish their song, Gabriel blows his trumpet signaling Saint Peter to open the gates of heaven for Troy. Gabriel succeeds in creating an opening in the fence in order for Troy to enter the kingdom of heaven; the gates of heaven open and Gabriel utters the last line in the play, "That's the way that go!" (92). Wilson chooses to end the play with a sense of hope through Troy's acceptance in Heaven and through the introduction of the characters of transformed Cory and little Raynell who symbolize transformation, love, hope, forgiveness, and the future.

Cory and Raynell's song is also symbolic and the good old dog named "Blue" stands for the people of the black community who stick to the principles of hard work, faithfulness, sincerity, and perseverance.

With Fences, Wilson has created a play that explores the barriers that confine blacks and stand between them and the achievement of their dreams. The play's title is a metaphor that stands for all the obstacles that imprison, limit, confine, restrict, preclude, and hinder. Rose asks Troy and Cory to build a fence in the backyard that will keep all those loved ones inside its walls. Troy has had enough fences in his life and is reluctant to build one more fence. He spent fifteen years behind bars with fences restricting his movements. When he played baseball, he was not satisfied with just hitting a home run into the stands that surround the field; he felt that he had to transcend all boundaries of the field and powerfully hit the ball long enough over the fence to outside the park. The fence that Troy completes fails to keep his son Cory inside. Cory escapes the authority of his restrictive father only to fall into a far more restrictive and confining institution- the military. Rose is also locked up in the institution of marriage, and Gabriel is confined in the mental hospital his brother put him in.. However, for African Americans, the most difficult insurmountable fence is that of race. It is the fence established by whites to abort their dreams and limit their opportunities, and the black experience in the institution of baseball bears witness to that pervasive racism. What Wilson suggests is that in order for one man's dream to be fulfilled, it should be supported by society, but the white American society in the 1950s did not help blacks pursue their dream.

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ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث بالدراسة رياضة البيسبول أو كرة القاعدة وظهورها كفكرة رئيسية مهيمنة تتكرر في الكثير من الأعمال الأدبية هذا وتعد تلك الرياضة، من الناحية النظرية على الأقل، تجسيدا حيا لمفهوم الحلم الأمريكي، هذا المفهوم الذي يشكل حجر الزاوية في الثقافة والتجربة الأمريكية في العصر الحديث. فعلى أرضية الملعب تتلاشى كل الفوارق الاجتماعية والعرقية والثقافية وتصبح المهارة والقدرة على الإنجاز هي المحك الرئيسي الذي يحدد قيمة اللاعب بغض النظر عن أصوله وطبقته أو لون بشرته. وعلى الرغم من المبادئ الديمقراطية التي تقوم عليها اللعبة من الناحية النظرية إلا أن تجربة السود وتاريخ مشاركتهم في تلك الرياضة يدحض كل الادعاءات القائلة بالعدالة والمساواة ويكشف زيف الحلم الأمريكي كمفهوم نظري غير قابل للتطبيق على أرض الواقع.

وتتناول الدراسة بالتحليل النقدي الدقيق مسرحية "أسوار" للكاتب الأمريكي الأسود "أوجست ويلسون" والتي يتناول فيه أحلام السود المجهضة وآمالهم المعلقة وذلك من خلال قصة بطل المسرحية "تروى ماكسون" لاعب كرة القاعدة الأسطوري الفذ الذي حيل بينه وبين تحقيق أحلامه بأن يصبح لاعبا بدوري الدرجة الأولى بسبب لون بشرته الأسود، بالإضافة الى أن فشل تجربته في مجال الرياضة قد أدى إلى هدم حياته الأسرية وتوتر علاقته بأبنائه وزوجته. هذا وينتمي البحث لأدب الرياضة الذي يعنى بدراسة العلاقة بين عالم الأدب وعالم الرياضة.