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Understanding the Context of the Conflict Between a Father and Son

August Wilson's "Fences" is a powerful story that shows us the life of an African-American family who find themselves in a time of transition American history. This change and shift in social structure, culture, law, and values is an important one to grasp as we try to understand the dynamics of the life of Troy, the patriarchal figure in the story, and his son Cory. Looking at the shift in American values during the late 50's can help us also understand what Troy and Cory build much of their identities upon, and where much of their struggle as father and son come from. Troy's trauma and frustration, along with the changing American landscape are the key if we are to try to understand their conflict and relationship as father and son.

Set in 1958, Fences pulls back the curtain on a transitioning America. Only a few years after Rosa Parks courageously refuses to give up her seat on a segregated bus, the civil rights movement has started gaining traction. Following Jim Crow laws in the 1880's, segregation in sports were still set, making it impossible for Colored players to join any major league in the United States. Although some pioneering horse jockeys in the 1880's, like Isaac Burns, were growing in popularity, Jim Crow laws made it impossible for colored athletes to compete. This would only completely change around 1950 or so, after the NBA, NFL, and the MLB became de-segregated. These first colored Athletes paved the way for future generations of athletes in American Sports history.

However, Troy Maxson in this story is out of luck. Born in 1904, Troy grew up in Jim Crow times. A time where black Americans were not represented at all in any major association, film, work, and even public transportation. Racial divide is at an incredible high still, and that is what Troy grows up knowing. Leaving his home at the age of 14, after witnessing his father rape a 13 year old girl and being beaten by him afterwards almost to the point of death, he travels to Pittsburg where he tries to settle down. He finds a woman and has a child but cannot seem to make ends meet. Leaving him no choice but to resort to stealing. And in one of those instances, he recounts a man shot him, and in return he killed the man out of defense. Troy is then sent to prison for 15 years, where he learns to play baseball. And after leaving prison, with a newfound passion, and newfound freedom, Troy begins to play baseball in the Negro leagues.

However, Troy is an old man for the sports world. Leaving prison at around 38, would make him too old for professional sports where players usually retire around their 40's. Combining the insecurity of his age, and the oppression he faced on and off the field generates a bitterness toward the world in the heart of Troy. A bitterness towards a sport that never did anything but hold him back in his eyes, and a bitterness toward a life that seems to have bullied him from the very beginning.

In one point we see the extent of the bitterness as Jackie Robinson enters the conversation. Troy says: "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 are. Come telling me I come too early. If you could play... then they ought to have let you play." (Wilson 1059)

Bobin points out that "In this conversation, Troy downplays the achievements of black players at the same time blaming white coaches and team managers. Both strategies reveal his frustration as a great

player in the Negro Leagues of the past. Troy is now too old to play on integrated teams and feels anger that his career helped create the change which ultimately left him behind. He sacrificed himself without being aware of it. Troy must be aware of the inevitability of integration in sports.” (Bobin 100)

In the same breath, Troy is quick to undermine the achievement of men like Jackie Robinson and blames white coaches and teams for segregation. All this frustration and bitterness ultimately leads us to see Troy as a symbol of all of those “who could’ve” but never were. In Troy we see the embodiment of African-American frustrations in attaining not just equality at the most basic level, but also equity and generational-wealth. A Product of a system that sets up the African-American for certain failure from the get-go. That is Troy; that is his story.

But that story is drastically different than that of his son who is born into a changing America unlike Troy. Where we see Troy as a symbol of what was, we see Cory as a symbol of what is to come. Cory is born into the world watching men like Jackie Robinson achieve all that they did. In his mind then, the stories of his father are nothing but fables of a time long gone, a time where the African-American had no opportunity and was oppressed. Troy and Cory embody the transition in mindset between two generations, and the struggles between themselves. Of course, in the course of the next decade or so, history reminds us that many things would still have to unfold until African-Americans began the journey to reconciliation after 400 years. Nothing would be solved immediately, and Cory’s struggle with his father reminds us of that. Koprince says “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 unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”” (Koprince 353)

Cory therefore, represents the generation that is trying to move on and fight. As he dreams of football, he knows in his heart, by watching men like Jackie Robinson, that things have changed. The wounds in his

case are only scratches on the surface, easily forgotten. He sees himself playing at the professional level because if Jackie could, then why can't he? That is what Cory knows, a certain comfort and freedom that is alien to his father who had to fight against what seemed to be the world since he can remember.

In summary, the frustration Troy feels as a "has been" and an oppressed black man shapes his view of the world. This leads him to lack faith for change in the future, even though he might sense it is coming. He undoubtedly looks to men like Jackie Robinson as inspiration, although his bitterness will not let him show it and we see this because he fights in his own job to become the first black driver. But ultimately, every glance at his son Cory and his dreams of football remind him that for him the stars did not align.

Work cited

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