A Tragic Example

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This essay was written for Baseball in Literature and History, co-taught by Dr. Heaphy and Dr. Sturr. The assignment was to write a short interpretive essay closely examining one novel from the course.

Peter Schilling Jr.’s novel, The End of Baseball, imagines a scenario of the integration of African American ballplayers into the major leagues. The protagonist, Josh Gibson, is a player of great promise who wants people to remember his name as the best ballplayer there ever was. It is important to note that this paper examines the fictional character of Josh Gibson and is not indicative of the real person of Josh Gibson. The fictional Josh has proven himself in the Negro Leagues, but now he has to prove himself in the major leagues. If he had received his chance at major league baseball when he was younger, his name would not have been forgotten. However, Josh’s chance has come too late, for his body, a player’s main commodity, is showing its age and abuse from years of playing ball. Aside from his delayed chance and deteriorating body, Josh faces other outside forces, such as the enormity of integration and unforgiving crowds and reporters. These forces then lead to internal demons, fear and self-pity. To escape this cycle, Josh turns to his vices, sex and drugs. Through the character of Josh Gibson, Schilling demonstrates how the interplay between internal and external forces can result in a tug of war between triumph and defeat that can perpetuate and eventually destroy one’s life.

One way that Schilling establishes this fundamental opposition of triumph and defeat, at the core of Josh’s being, is through an initial description of him. First of all, as he describes Josh’s body, he sets up the first opposition: “Leaning on his massive forearms, he looked up, and his face, almost childlike with its soft features, seemed perched on a body not its own” (Schilling 18). This is the first indication that perhaps he is immature, and not well equipped to handle the greatness that his body could achieve. In addition, this description reinforces later depictions of his childlike need to escape into his vices for comfort.

Schilling continues this mode of description to delve into his character: “He’d been dozing on the ground to get away from the heat and sunlight, and the willow floor was dark and cool by contrast” (18). This statement is significant on two levels. First of all, a second opposition exists in the images of sunlight and darkness. The heat and sunlight suggest one being on fire and becoming a shining star. While the images of the cool and darkness suggest one hiding from their potential greatness. Likewise, Josh hiding under an “old willow tree” (Schilling 16) not only parallels his age, but also suggests his desire to be nurtured and kept safe. This further suggests that Josh is symbolically hiding in the dark because he is afraid of failure. Second, the fact that he was dozing off during a game suggests that Josh has checked out of the game and is not even cognizant that the game is passing him by.

When Bill Veeck tells Josh that he is their “star attraction . . . [and a] legend,” Josh responds with doubt and surrender: “Ah, I don’t know . . . No sir. All I want now is a bottle . . . Josh Gibson’s long gone” (Schilling 18). Indeed, he seems to have given up. However, after Gracie reminds him of his promise to be “on top of the world” (Schilling 18), she starts to feed Josh his bats, which awakens him to action. Symbolically, he settles on the bat, East, which represents his rise again. That is, his rise to action and triumph parallels the rise of the brightest star, the sun.

This first scene with Josh also establishes that his triumphs are many times coupled with defeat. Josh faces negative external forces, such as angry fans
“shouting racial slurs,” a pitcher trying to bean him in the head, and an ump who is making calls that are blatantly wrong (Schilling 20). The narrator states that Josh is used to it, and that the “years of abuse had hardened him” (Schilling 20). However, as the novel progresses, it becomes evident that such abuse has taken its toll on him. Despite his triumphant homer, he is defeated because he was standing outside of the box. Since this is the first experience readers have with Josh, his initial setback does not inhibit them from believing that his promise of greatness is still reachable.

As Josh struggles to perform at the training in Florida, Campy reminds him of the enormity of integration: “... I’m just worried, is all. Just want to make sure he’s the best there is. We got a lot ridin’ on you. The whole world does” (Schilling 72). Josh internalizes the weight and responsibility of this situation. Moreover, because he submits himself to fear of failure, he turns to his vices, sex and drugs/alcohol, which then contributes to his downward spiral. For example, on the day of the first opening, Campy finds Josh and Gracie passed out in bed: “The room reeked of booze and sweat. Josh and Gracie lay sprawled across the bed, both naked, a sheet tangled around them” (Schilling 100). Not only does this scene establish Josh’s vices, it also parallels and foreshadows his final downfall that ends in death. For instance, Gene Benson alludes to their future deaths when he asks, “They dead?” (Schilling 100). Clearly, this is foreshadowing because this is exactly how they are found in the end. In addition, the narrator states that Josh “wasn’t anything more than dead weight” (Schilling 101). This statement reinforces the uselessness of his old, abused body, and suggests that he is as good as dead before the season has even begun.

Schilling further develops the connections among the importance of making it in the major leagues, his aged body, and the resultant defeat. Later that morning, Josh remembers his achievements of the past but considers them as a “prologue” (Schilling 103). In fact, he says to himself, “Now when he stoked sixty big bombs the world would shudder... if only my body can keep up, I’ll knock this game on its ear” (Schilling 103-4). Through his thoughts, Schilling establishes the opposition of his triumph and defeat. That is, Josh expresses the truth of past triumphs and the hope for future feats, sobered by the reality of his body’s condition.

As Josh steps to the plate, he says to himself, “This is it, slugger... this is the ringing of the Liberty Bell, Josh Gibson’s in the big leagues” (Schilling 108). The connection to the Liberty Bell is important because it represents freedom. Josh longs to be free from the constraints of race, the burden of integration, the fight to constantly prove himself, and the painful age of his body. However, these grand hopes are followed by another defeat. In this scene, it is important to note that he uses his West bat. Symbolically, his failure parallels the setting of the sun, which leads to darkness.

Josh continues to experience the opposition of triumph and defeat. After he gets cleaned up from drugs, he performs wonderfully with the Eagles. However, when he joins the A’s again, he faces yet another slump. Succumbing to his self-pity and fear of failure, he sneaks out and hides in the equipment room of Yankee Stadium. As in the beginning, Josh is hiding in the dark, which further establishes his tragic cycle. When Satchel finds him crying in the dark, the reader gains more insight into Josh’s struggles. For example, the reader discovers that the press, specifically the Inquirer, calls him the “Phantom Slugger” (Schilling 255). Certainly, the press acts as a heckler and affects Josh’s game, just as Pete Adels affects Artie.

Moreover, the reader gains insight through Satchel’s thoughts: “... Satch could see that the years of hard living had taken their toll, and Josh wasn’t equipped to handle that reality: it wasn’t just the drugs that were keeping him from hitting, his body was falling apart. If anything, Josh was worse since [the Eagles]” (Schilling 255). This slump is worse than the others because he cannot blame it on anything but himself, and it drives home the fact that he is the reason for his failure, not the drugs.

Finally, Josh begins to rise, with East in his hands, as he practices against Satchel before the game. Later, when Josh steps to the plate, he is faced with negative forces as the crowd “shouted, cajoled, [and] made fun of him. Josh the fatty, Josh the old man, Josh any number of weak swinging, impotent, homosexual invectives” (Schilling 269). With East in his hands, Josh rises above all negative forces to his shining moment and triumphantly hits home run after home run. Furthermore, he hits a homer out of Yankee Stadium, suddenly winning the praise and adoration from both the fans and his teammates. After the game, Schilling notes that it was the first time the press
had talked to him all season (272). At last, Josh has gained his rightful recognition in a major league game.

Following this amazing victory, Josh fails again and again, falling into yet another slump. On the morning of his death, Josh sits, looking out the window at boys playing ball. Schilling uses this moment to reinforce the contrast of his age and the promising youth of his past. Gracie then tries to encourage Josh by telling him, "Don't worry about this season. They'll still remember you. Why not go over and play with them, Josh" (Schilling 300). However, Josh responds, "Don't feel like it... Children are cruel" (Schilling 300). Again, Josh is stuck in the cycle of outside forces, his age, and his internal demons, self-pity and fear of failure.

Cochrane throws him the final oppositional blow when he informs Josh that he is being sent to play in Milwaukee. Up to this point, Josh has continued to have hope that he can still be the best, despite his setbacks. Showing Cochrane his calculations, he claims, "If I play and hit well in the last month, I can show 'em. I done it before, just last year in fact, so I can do it again. I'm Josh Gibson, don't you get it? Could have played 'longside Ruth... You can't send me down, understand?" (Schilling 302). However, Cochrane does not allow Josh the chance to show them, and once again, he is kept from his potential triumph. Thus, faced with ultimate defeat, Josh falls into a tailspin.

The final scenes of Josh's life become heavy with symbolic images that parallel, or represent his life. For example, Josh walks through the "run-down neighborhoods" and looks "at the buildings that used to stand tall and proud [but] now looked like something big had knocked them askew. You wouldn't know to walk the neighborhood that it had once been beautiful, a place you could be proud of" (Schilling 302). Indeed, the scenery parallels his life as a ballplayer, because he is now run-down. Furthermore, he used to stand tall and proud, but many forces have knocked him off course. Likewise, he used to be a ballplayer that he and his fans could be proud of. Just as he stands among "an empty lot, [with] broken glass and weeds and dog shit" (Schilling 302), so does he stand among the glory of his past, now littered with broken dreams and overgrown with setbacks.

Finally, he blames himself: "Shoulda taken better care of myself. No one's fault but my own" (Schilling 303). Ironically, he regrets his drug use as he is buying more drugs. When Josh arrives home, he tells Gracie, "Can't all be angels" (Schilling 303), which amplifies his final surrender to his personal demons. At this point, he looks up at the sky and sees "nothing but a slab of deep black [for] the city had devoured the stars" (Schilling 303-4). This is significant because it not only represents that he will not reach his desire to be a star, but also confirms that he has been devoured by external and internal forces.

Schilling also uses the description of Josh's shack to parallel his life. For example, the hamburger wrappers, apple cores, and peach pits that are strewn about, all represent items that are missing their essence. Likewise, all that is left of Josh is a shell of a ballplayer. Moreover, despite the remnants of these items, they are still recognizable by what is left, which forces the reader to picture what they used to look like, as with Josh. Furthermore, these items represent old, rotten trash that will eventually be thrown away, just as Josh was as a ballplayer.

Finally, Campy discovers their bodies in bed, just as before. However, this time they are both dead. It is important to note that as Campy opens the blinds, a sunset is occurring, which parallels the final setting of Josh's life. Campy also decides to lay West between him and Gracie, and later he is buried with it. This too is symbolically important, as it represents the sun that sets in the West. Just as the brightest star, the sun, must give way to the darkness, so must Josh's dreams of being the best ballplayer.

Although other examples exist throughout Schilling's novel, these scenes map out his constant tug of war between triumph and failure. Moreover, Josh's opposition between external forces and internal demons do eventually get the better of him. Whether it is the press, or the crowd, or the enormity of integration, certainly, outside forces worked on Josh, as he turned to his vices. In self-pity he surrenders to his failure as a ballplayer and embraces destruction. In the end, he was not able to overcome the cycle. The fictional character of Josh Gibson is a tragic example of how constant disappointments can have the power to destroy when they are internalized.

Works Cited