



Ex-basketball Player Analysis

"Ex-Basketball Player," by John Updike is the poem that struck me this week.

It is about a man who once had great potential but never followed through with it. Flick Webb is the focus of this poem; he was a basketball star in high school quite some time ago, but nowadays he merely pumps gas at a local station. The first stanza provides the readers with geographical information about the location of the gas station. "Pearl Avenue runs past the high school lot, bends with the trolley tracks, and stops, cut off before it has a chance to go two blocks," (line 1-3). This description and particular choice of words represents the course of Flick's life.

The description begins at the high school lot, symbolizing when Flick finished high school. His adult life then began to get started, bending "with the trolley tracks", but suddenly it was stopped by this gas station, "cut off" before he really got anywhere in life, before he had "a chance to go two blocks," (2-3). The gas station, "Berth's Garage" it is called, is the place where Flick will probably spend the rest of his life, being just the person who "helps Berth out," (6). The second stanza describes Flick (whose name might come from the flicking of a basketball) as standing among the gas pumps.

The pumps stand "five on a side," (8) which could be a reference to basketball where there are five players on each side. Updike describes one of the pumps as "without a head at all—more of a football type," (12). This could be a subtle jab at football players, who are sometimes pinned as not being the brightest individuals. This mockery of a basketball game goes further when Flick dribbles an inner tube as a joke later in the third stanza.

The third stanza describes Flick's past, the prime of his years playing basketball in high school. "He was good: in fact, the best," (14). He held a county record, which suggests that he was not the best ever, since it is a county record as compared to a state or higher record, but he definitely still had ample potential. "The ball loved Flick," (16).

This is contrasted in the next stanza, where his hands and fine touch which were loved by the ball "make no difference to the lug wrench," (24). Updike uses the most striking imagery at the end of the third stanza; "His hands were like wild birds," (18). This can imply that his hands were nimble and extremely fast, but still maintained an air of the athletic gracefulness that birds have. In the fourth stanza, Flick is seen as only selling gas, performing maintenance on people's cars, and jokingly dribbling inner tubes. This is what all his skill and potential has amounted to.

In the fifth and final stanza, even on his free time off work Flick wastes his life playing pinball, drinking soda, and smoking. He "just nods...toward bright applauding tiers of Necco Wafers, Nibs, and Juju Beads," (28-30). Applauding tiers, n

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