

# FOIL AND THE STRIP: SPORTS ELEMENTS IN *BLACK BROTHER, BLACK BROTHER*.

**BALAKUMAR. R, Research Scholar,**  
Department of English,  
Government Arts and Science College,  
(Affiliated to Bharathiar University)  
Kangeyam – 638 108. India.

**Dr. SIVASAMY. R, Associate Professor,**  
Department of English,  
Government Arts and Science College,  
(Affiliated to Bharathiar University)  
Dharapuram – 638 656. India.

## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to describe how the sport of fencing is used as a backdrop to propel the story in the novel *Black Brother, Black Brother* by Jewell Parker Rhodes and its impact on the main character, Donte Ellison, who used the sport to encounter his racist adversary. It also highlights sports elements like the underdog narrative archetype, the significance of mentorship, and the big game as a test of resolve, as represented in the novel. This essay explores the significant role of sports elements in the novel. Through the experiences of the main characters, Donte, the novel effectively portrays how engagement in sports, particularly fencing, becomes a means of empowerment, resilience, and defiance against societal expectations. The conclusion shows that sports elements not only shape the characters but also drive the narrative of the story, highlighting the transformative power of sports in building self-confidence, fostering discipline, and challenging stereotypes.

## Method

Qualitative research method is applied because the study examines the protagonist's experiences, the author's viewpoints, and the societal and personal contexts that are depicted in the literary work. To understand the sports features and how a character managed a sport to exact revenge on his hector, the researcher reads the novel, peruses associated data, conducts research, and reviews related studies.

## Keywords

Black brother, sports elements, fencing and racial prejudice.

### 1. Introduction

Sports are often regarded as a significant aspect of society, influencing individuals' physical and mental well-being and promoting social interactions (Alasinrin and Ajeigbe). In the novel *Black Brother, Black Brother*, written by Jewell Parker Rhodes, sports elements are present and play a crucial role in shaping the characters and driving the narrative of the story (Shingjergji). The novel *Black Brother Black Brother* is a captivating work that delves deep into the themes of racial inequality, personal identity, and the power of sports. This essay explores the various sports elements present in this compelling narrative. At the heart of the story lies the protagonist, Donte, a young Black student who is unfairly targeted and stereotyped by his peers, "Girls laugh and point at me. 'Why can't you be like your brother?' 'Can your brother find you in the dark?'" I breathe. "It hurts. All of it." (Rhodes 6-7) and teachers "Mrs. Kay stands. Her eyes are kind. I think she might comfort me. The headmaster waves her away, then sighs. "Why can't you be more like your brother?" (Rhodes 8) due to his skin color. He becomes depressed as whole school mocks at him for his color, "Black brother. Black brother." My new nickname. The whole school seemed to whisper it." (Rhodes 13) Seeking a

means to assert his identity and find a sense of belonging, Donte turns to the world of fencing, “I’ll learn fencing.” (Rhodes 41) a sport that is traditionally associated with the upper echelons of society, “Fencing has aristocratic roots. But you belong here. We all do...In this arena, fencing seems like a white sport.” (Rhodes 160-161) The author’s masterful incorporation of fencing into the narrative serves as a powerful metaphor for the challenges and struggles faced by Donte and other marginalized individuals in navigating a society that often favors the privileged and the powerful. Through Donte’s journey, the reader is immersed in the intricate dynamics of the fencing community, where the discipline, strategy, and physical agility required to excel in the sport become a catalyst for personal growth, a means of empowerment, and a pathway to self-discovery.

## 2. Sports Fiction and Sports Elements

Sports fiction is a story where a sport influences the storyline or the main character. The narrative may center on a coach who faces challenges in life but finds solace and serenity in being with the team and the game. Alternatively, the narrative can center on a poor adolescent whose aptitude for a particular sport enables them to overcome personal challenges or deters them from using drugs. Oriard (p-6, 1982) defined a sports novel “simply as one in which sport plays a dominant role or in which the sport milieu is the dominant setting.”

## 3. Setting

Sports fiction is usually set in the real world, usually in the present, though it can also take place in the past. In keeping with this tradition, *Black Brother Black Brother* is situated in modern-day America. The story unfolds in a contemporary setting -2020, likely at the private school - Middlefield Prep. This environment, predominantly white and unfamiliar with Donte’s background, “Though sometimes I feel like I’m swimming in whiteness. Most of the students at Middlefield Prep don’t look like me. They don’t like me either.” (Rhodes 3–4) fuels the racial prejudice he encounters. Fencing, a sport often associated with the elite, sets the stage for the story. The plot moves on because of the intriguing tension created by the conflict between the harsh reality of social bigotry and the ideals of sportsmanship.

## 4. Plot

The novel’s plot revolves around Donte’s struggle against racial prejudice. Framed by Alan, “But it’s Alan who punishes, who makes me being darker than my brother a crime.” (Rhodes 44) he finds himself ostracized and suspended. In this moment of despair, fencing emerges as an outlet and a path to vindication, “I’ll defend myself against Alan” (Rhodes 79). Donte throws himself into training, aiming to excel in a sport traditionally associated with privilege and strategy. This personal conflict, fuelled by the desire to prove himself, pushes the narrative forward and aligns with the core themes of overcoming adversity often found in sports fiction. Through his participation in fencing, the narrative gains depth and complexity, moving the plot forward while emphasizing the role of sports in growth and social equity. Donte’s journey, from a victim of racial prejudice to a resilient and empowered individual, is a testament to the transformative power of sports.

## 5. Characters

In tales set within the realm of sports, one often encounters team members, individuals uncovering abilities, or student-athletes. *Black Brother, Black Brother* showcases an ensemble centered around Donte - student athlete as he uncovers his talent and enthusiasm for fencing. Key figures include his encouraging brother Trey, his mentor -Arden Jones, “Arden Jones is who I need. He’s going to teach. Help me make the Middlefield Prep fencing team.” (Rhodes 51) who is on the field, and fellow teammates Zarra and Zion. These characters play roles in Donte’s evolution, each contributing to his maturation and understanding of himself and the world. Their interactions mirror both unity and tension commonly found in sporting environments, enriching the authenticity of the narrative. The mentorship provided by his coach, a former Olympic fencer, adds another layer, highlighting the importance of guidance and support in athletic pursuits. With his experience and wisdom, he becomes a crucial figure in Donte’s journey.

## 6. Themes

Works of sports fiction frequently explore themes such as resilience, collaboration, fair play, and personal progression—themes vividly depicted in *Black Brother, Black Brother*. Donte's determination in the face of challenges, his commitment to excelling in fencing, and his personal journey toward self-acceptance and empowerment play a role in the narrative. The book also highlights the significance of teamwork "...I get an inkling of why Trey likes sport. Team. Teamwork. A different kind of family." (Rhodes 98) and guidance, illustrating how encouragement from coaches "... watching your focus, your joy, I knew you were born to fence." (Rhodes 173) and peers can influence an individual's achievements. It delves into sportsmanship through the values of respect and discipline in fencing while showcasing Donte's evolution from a marginalized student to an athlete as a broader theme of personal growth.

### 6.1 Fencing to Face Racial Prejudice

Like many sports, fencing offers a platform for individuals to showcase their skills and abilities regardless of their background or physical appearance. For someone like Donte Ellison, who faced prejudice due to racism, "You can't tell who's who. Who's white. Who's black. Just two fencers trying to score." (Rhodes 213) excelling in fencing can serve as a form of empowerment and a means to challenge stereotypes. He chooses fencing as Alan is good at it, "Then I'll learn fencing." (Rhodes 41) and decides to prove his ability, "I'll defend myself against Alan." (Rhodes 79) Here is how Donte uses fencing positively:

### 6.2 From Rage to Respect: Channelling Frustration into Focus

In fencing, success is primarily determined by skill, strategy, and dedication, "Tactics. Fencing isn't just slapping foils; it's lightning speed decisions." (Rhodes 120) rather than physical appearance, "You can't tell who's who. Who's white. Who's black. Just two fencers trying to score." (Rhodes 213) and "Skill makes the man." (Rhodes 221) Donte can use his talents and abilities in the sport to gain recognition and respect, regardless of any prejudices he may face. Donte's initial motivation for learning fencing is undeniably linked to a desire to defeat Alan. The constant microaggressions and the traumatic experience of being arrested due to Alan's actions leave Donte simmering with anger. However, as he trains under the tutelage of Mr. Jones, fencing evolves beyond a tool for revenge. The sport offers a constructive outlet for his frustration. The regimented structure of practice sessions, the physical demands of lunges and parries, and the mental focus required for strategy become an empowering channel for Donte's emotions. As he masters various techniques and develops his skills, he gains a sense of accomplishment that transcends the desire to humiliate Alan.

### 6.3 Building a Support System: Finding Belonging Beyond Racial Divisions

The world of fencing provides Donte with a sense of belonging that is often absent in his daily life. Unlike the predominantly white spaces where Donte feels like an outsider due to his race, the fencing club fosters camaraderie and acceptance. He finds a supportive network within the fencing community, where his talents are valued and respected, regardless of his background. He connects with fellow fencers Zion and Zarra, forging friendships built on shared passion and mutual respect. Through these relationships and his interactions with the wise and encouraging Mr. Jones, Donte confronts issues of race and identity in a safe and supportive environment. He begins to see himself not just as the target of prejudice but as an individual with potential and talent, "I know who I am - Donte Ellison, son of William and Denise Ellison, brother of Trey Ellison. Arden Jones's student; Zion and Zarra's teammate. Me. Everyone in the arena sees me. Fencing champion." (Rhodes 228) This shift in perspective allows him to move beyond the initial rage towards Alan and view him with a newfound understanding, perhaps even a hint of empathy.

## 7. Conclusion

*Black Brother, Black Brother* transcends a single genre, offering a compelling sports narrative intertwined with a poignant social message. Through the portrayal of the participation of Donte in sports, especially fencing, the novel shows how a sport can be a source of empowerment, resiliency, and defiance of social norms. Fencing serves as both a setting and a metaphor for Donte's struggle for justice and equality in the book. It is a captivating sports narrative interwoven with a powerful social message. It serves as a powerful vehicle for addressing and challenging the issues of racism, discrimination, and societal expectations by incorporating sports elements. This unique blend makes it a story that resonates on multiple levels. It is a powerful example of how sports fiction can be a platform for social commentary.

## Works Cited

- Alasinrin, Semiu, and Issa Yaqub Ajeigbe. "Sports Participation and Its Implication on the Academic Performance of Students in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria: A Literature Review." *Edu Sportivo: Indonesian Journal of Physical Education*, vol. 2, no. 3, Dec. 2021, pp. 180–89, [https://doi.org/10.25299/es:ijope.2021.vol2\(3\).7929](https://doi.org/10.25299/es:ijope.2021.vol2(3).7929)
- Oriard, Michael. *Dreaming of Heroes: American Sports Fiction 1868-1980*. Burnham, Incorporated, 1982.
- Rhodes, Jewell Parker. *Black Brother, Black Brother*. 2020. Little, Brown and Company, 2021, pp. 3–4.
- Shingjergji, Ardian. "Effects of Physical Education into Improving the Quality of the Students' Achievements in the High Education Institutions." *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Dec. 2015, <https://doi.org/10.5901/ajis.2015.v4n3s1p520>

### Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.