

## Prosperity as an American Dream: A Study on Ben Fowlkes's *You'll Apologize If You Have To*

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### Abstract

*You'll Apologize If You Have To* (2015), a short story by Ben Fowlkes, portrays the struggle of an American in pursuing his dreams. The primary data of this research is the narration and dialogues uttered by the characters: Wallace, Kim, Molly, the Old Lady, and the Green-Jacket Man. Those data are classified based on the American dreams (Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, Livingston, & Sherman, 2014; Cullen, 2003; Mailer, Thompson, & Wolfe, 2009), specifically those related to material wealth. The result of this research reveals that in their daily life, the characters have their perspectives on seeing America as the land of dreams. Generally, they dream of a better life and happiness. However, this short story also portrays American dreams as a paradox because not all Americans have the privilege to achieve those dreams.

**Keywords:** American Studies, quality of life, boxing, better life

### INTRODUCTION

A short story can be the portrayal of humans in society because it might contain the metaphors shown by the characters (Barrett, 2009; Franssen & Kuipers, 2015) as it is also found in Ben Fowlkes' *You'll Apologize If You Have To* (Boyle, 2015). The main character is Wallace, a professional boxing athlete, which is also told as a hardworking person and a loving father of his daughter, Molly. He lives alone in a condominium in San Diego, USA, and lives his life for boxing. This short story begins with the fighting of Wallace in Florida when he had to fight a Brazilian fighter, Cavalo. He had to deal with his loss, and he started to doubt himself. Despite giving up, he struggles to get his dream.

The author, Ben Fowlkes, lives in Missoula, Montana. He is a senior author of a martial art sports portal, *MMAJunkie.com*. He also covers on *USA Today* for professional boxing since 2006 for some media outlets such as *Sports Illustrated*, *CBS Sports*, *AOL Sports*, and many more (Gems & Pfister, 2009; Perkins, HAHN, LUCAS, & KEEGAN, 2014a; USA BOXING, 2017).

America is the land of dreams. Everyone in America has such dreams to pursue. Martin Luther King Jr. said in his speech that the dreams of America are all men are created to be equal, full of blessings from their Creator without boundaries on having and getting the rights, such as life, liberty, and pursuing happiness (Luther, 1964). Happiness may mean many different things, some people might be happy if they can get the material wealth, as seen also in this short story. *You'll Apologize If You Have To* tells the struggles on fitting the American dreams, especially on pursuing happiness. The objective of the study is, to figure out the paradox of pursuing happiness in Ben Fowlkes's *You'll Apologize If You Have To* because all of the characters have their definition of happiness. This study is also a part of a thesis by Maulita Ridha Hafshah entitled *American Dreams Depicted in Ben Fowlkes's You'll Apologize If You Have To*.

### METHODOLOGY

The sociological approach is appropriate in this current study because it examines society and its relations (Tischler, 2007). After all, literary works are the product of society. In this case, sociology is

implemented to understand the rules including values, norms, religions, and or laws that consciously and unconsciously control the community. Wallace, as the main character of Ben Fowlkes' *You'll Apologize If You Have To* is one of those who have to struggle against such rules mentioned above. In this case, American values are considered as one of the rules controlling Wallace on getting his dreams of better living. In brief, this research examines how Wallace as the main character of Ben Fowlkes's *You'll Apologize If You Have To* see and pursue the American Dreams.

Wallace is a boxer living in America wherein boxing became a profitable business that attracted the wide attention of the public. Each boxing athlete can receive up to USD 50 million from a world championship. Moreover, many marketing divisions on several brands use some boxing athletes to increase their income. Also, boxing became the strong attention of public entertainment such as worldwide television appeal which was watched by 2,5 million people, automatically gained USD 150 millions of per-pay-view profits (Gems & Pfister, 2009; Perkins, HAHN, LUCAS, & KEEGAN, 2014b; USA BOXING, 2017). Even though boxing became a reputable business as it gained so many profits, many effects appeared on some athletes on doing their career. Some boxers who dreamed about fame and chose boxing as the way to fulfill their economic needs sometimes will be followed by the effects of loneliness, rapid, harmful, and questioning the function of their existence. Despite the side effects of being a boxer, Wallace, who is an immigrant in America, has the similar points of view as the other immigrants who saw America as the land of dreams having the opportunity of success regardless of their position or class by believing in hard work (Adams et al., 2014; Beach, 2007; Mailer et al., 2009). In contrast, some Americans can be pessimistic in seeing the American dream because there is a wide gap between the rich and the poor (Adams et al., 2014), this phenomenon can also be seen in Wallace, as the main character who sees this condition.

Although many Americans face this gap, they still believe that happiness can be achieved through freedom of thought and freedom of poverty (Muhni,

2002). The freedom of thought, began with the Civil Rights Movement in the USA around the 1950s-1960s that all races have equal opportunity. Freedom of poverty is about wealth and success which is depicted in Benjamin Franklin's fictional character named Poor Richard, who pointed out four actions - *industry*, *frugality*, *prudence*, and *prayer* - to pursue happiness.

Most Americans believe that happiness relates to wealth which can be obtained by four main actions (Muhni, 2002). First is the *industry* which means hard work; the second is *frugality*, which means being wise on spending money; the third is *prudence*, which means being cautious and wisely manage one's property; and the last is *prayer* meaning that wealth comes because of God's Grace, so people must remember that everything they have, including wealth and success, is given by God. Ben Fowlkes' *You'll Apologize If You Have To* (2015) talks about the American Dream, one of which is pursuing happiness. It is depicted by the characters' actions and dialogues showing the tendencies and efforts to achieve a better life. Like most Americans, the characters in the short story also want a better quality of life, one of them is Wallace, who wants to be a professional fighter to gain wealth.

The intrinsic elements of the short story, such as plot, characters and characterization, conflicts, and theme of Ben Fowlkes' *You'll Apologize If You Have To* (2015) will be the important data to analyze the issues related to the American dream. To strengthen the previous point, the definitions of American dreams (Adams et al., 2014; Beach, 2007; Doran & Littrell, 2013) as well as its extrinsic elements, are also implemented. To validate the data, a retro-active reading is implemented in figuring out the issues of American dreams and values.

Furthermore, in analyzing and interpreting the data, the data related to the USA's boxing around the 2000s, as well as the theories of American dreams and values will be used to control the objectivity of the data and discussion. The last step of this research is drawing the conclusion based on the analysis.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ben Fowlkes' *You'll Apologize If You Have To* (2015) tells us a story about Wallace, who is a boxer. He was a successful boxer, who is not so fortunate anymore. He shifts his life from the wealthy to the less one. This short story tells how a boxer pursues his American dream. Also, this short story depicts in a simple yet interesting way, the life of a part of a middle-class society as represented by Wallace.

Wallace is told as a boxer who was able to win some championships. Because of that, he becomes the focus of attention in his surroundings. One of the attentions comes from the reporters hunting for the news related to Wallace, because he loses his last match, as seen in the following excerpt:

He plugged in his phone and it lit up with all the stuff he'd been avoiding... A couple of texts from some reporters who wanted to talk about the fight. He put the phone in his pocket and decided not to think about it anymore (Boyle, 2015).

From the above excerpt, Wallace tries to avoid those reporters after he fails in a championship. He lets the battery of his phone off, so none of them can find him. Fowlkes presents Wallace's inner conflict, even before he has the real interview with the reporters, he has the prejudice that those reporters will dig his failure in his last match. This might portray the condition in the USA boxers' real life where boxers not only gain profits but also become a good commodification, even from the news and interviews with the losers (Perkins et al., 2014b). The reporters, although indirectly depicted as the characters in the short story, they might be the portrayal of the real-life condition of the reporters, especially those who report the news about sports, in the USA. They have to gain as many and as interesting news as possible as part of their responsibility. This condition might lead them to do something that in a way is called as unethical, or impolite way to do: interviewing someone that is not in his best condition, proven by the data that Wallace lost his last match before. What the reporters do is seen as the industry values (Muhni,

2002) in which a person should work hard to earn for his or her living. Chasing Wallace for the interview is seen as an evidence of the reporters' hard work.

On the other hand, although Wallace's fame in boxing can be annoying when he cannot win the match, Wallace still survives in being a boxer because he sees that boxing can be a good stepping stone for him to gain his American dreams. Therefore, Wallace works hard to be financially independent by putting himself in the boxing field. In other words, Wallace practices the same value as what the reporters do, it is the industry value (Muhni, 2002), shown by Wallace's choice to be persistent in the boxing field.

Wallace went all the way to Florida to fight a Brazilian middleweight he'd never heard of for ten thousand dollars... Somewhere off where he couldn't see, Cavalo and his coaches were singing in Portuguese. It took him a second to understand that the field of light around Coach Vee's face was coming from the ceiling. (Fowlkes, 2015, p. 82-83)

From the above excerpt, it can be seen that Wallace fights for ten thousand dollars, which is a huge amount of money for him. This award of ten thousand dollars can be both contextual and conventional symbols (Kuiper, 2012) in this short story. It is a conventional symbol because this amount of money, if given in real-life, is indeed a huge amount of money, above the monthly mean income in the USA in the 2000s which is only 8,174 USD (Service, 2021). Therefore, ten thousand dollars can symbolize wealth, both in this short story and in the real life. Contextually, ten thousand dollars can be a means for success for a boxer, represented by Wallace in this sort of story. This is called the value of industry for the Americans (Muhni, 2002) in which Americans pursue their wealth as one of the ways to be happy. Unfortunately, Wallace failed the competition which then makes him disappointed and avoids others because of his feeling sad and ashamed.

Interestingly, Cavalo, a Brazilian fighter is also interested to get the reward: that huge amount of money. This portrays the real-life condition in

which the boxing competition in the USA can be followed by all people around the world even if they are not citizens of the USA (Perkins et al., 2014a; USA BOXING, 2017). This represents that the USA is like a magnet for anyone willing to pursue the American dream and to be whatever they want to be. Boxing is one of the ways for the boxers to fight not only against the other boxers but also against poverty. By joining in the boxing competition, a boxer can elevate his class in society. In brief, this proves that Americans have this kind of value, it is the freedom of poverty (Muhni, 2002). Boxer is a good business for not only the fighters but also people surround it such as coaches, ticket sellers, the business of merchandise, and many other things (Perkins et al., 2014a).

In a flashback plot, it is told that Wallace was a fortunate boxer. He was able to be the winner of many competitions which brought him to success. He was able to live independently in his condominium bought from his rewards as a boxer. In that condominium, he was able to live his life with his small family: a girlfriend and a daughter.

It was back when he first bought the condo, his first year in the Big Show, the same year his daughter was born. He fought three times in a year. He made a half-million dollars just in purses and bonuses alone. (Boyle, 2015, p. 84)

It is conveyed in the above excerpt that Wallace was a happy and successful boxer previously. He could buy a condominium from the rewards of three fights in a year. He did not need to fight so often to get that big amount of money. When the average person in the USA works eight hours per day to get around USD 8,000 per month (Service, 2021), Wallace needed only three fights a year, he could get half-million dollars, buy a condominium, and live a life in the USA.

In this case, a condominium is a symbol of an independent life in which he has his shelter for himself and his family. Moreover, being a boxer that is famous and wins many competition will bring good luck for a boxer because he can be an ambassador for numerous brands related to boxing such as sports, fashion, vitamins, and others. A

boxer who can win a match can also get a big amount of money as the bonuses (Perkins et al., 2014a), which then makes Wallace's life even much better, especially in his economic condition. By buying himself and his family a condominium, Wallace practices the value of frugality in which he spends his money wisely for the primary need (Muhni, 2002).

On the contrary, there is another character in the short story who comes from the upper-class society but is depicted as someone who cannot spend her money wisely. Instead, she spends her money buying herself alcoholic drinks.

"We're going to trust this man and let him in to talk to us," she said to the dog. "We're going to trust him and hope he is worthy of that." ... That's when Wallace realized she was drunk. (Boyle, 2015, p. 97)

The excerpt above shows the sequence of the event when Wallace comes to a woman's house and sees that the woman is drunk while talking to her dog.

"The thing about my husband," the woman was saying, "is that idleness gets the better of him. He's not a bad man, but he doesn't have much to do. Sometimes that leads to trouble." "He doesn't work?" Wallace said, and then wished he hadn't. "Oh no," she said. "Not for years. I have money, you see, and anyway, he's not cut out for most jobs. He's very sensitive. He's not a bad man. But he is very, very sensitive. Does that make sense to you?" Wallace said it did, and the woman smiled appreciatively. (Boyle, 2015, p. 98).

The old woman implicitly told Wallace that her husband is a troubled person. She makes it more polite and covert when saying that her husband is an easily sensitive person, rather than stating it the direct way that her husband is an easily irritated one. This condition makes her addicted to alcohol, to escape from the reality that she is being abused by her husband. This depicts the real-life situation in the USA, in which depressed people might be addicted to alcohol (NIH & NIAAA, 2000). The condition that the old

woman spends her money on alcoholic beverages also shows that not all Americans have the same point of view towards frugality. Different backgrounds enable them to have different ways of life shown by the different way of spending money between Wallace and the old woman, although they live in the same society, in this case, in the USA, assuming that they might pursue the same American values.

Furthermore, managing money can be difficult for those who do not have enough income, which made a gap between social classes, and the phenomenon of inequality is also portrayed in this short story. The gap between the poor and the rich can be one of the factors why most Americans being pessimistic (Wolak & Peterson, 2020) as shown by the following excerpt:

"I live right over there," the man said, pointing at a big yellow house on the other side of the estuary.

"So, I smell it when someone smokes weed back here. My kids smell it. There's no way not to smell it. You get what I'm saying?" ....

"Where do you live?" the man said. "Those apartments?"

"They're condos," Wallace said. (Boyle, 2015, p. 86)

From the above excerpt, the man living in an upper-class society is shown by his big house. On the contrary, Wallace lives in a condominium as a part of the middle-class society. When Wallace and the man have a dispute, the man beastly stated that he lives in that 'big yellow house', as if he highlights the point that he is in the upper class than Wallace is. This man's boast triggers Wallace to emotionally grab the man's sleeve, which later haunts Wallace with a pang of guilt.

Another gap between the haves and the have nots is shown in another excerpt:

There was a dirt path that dead-ended in about a dozen places, depending on the water level, before eventually snaking its way to the big houses with ocean views on the other side. People didn't go back to the estuary often. The people in the

condos looked out on it every day and the people in the big houses on the other side probably never did. They hadn't paid all that money to be close to a saltwater swamp. They paid to look out at the beach. (Boyle, 2015, p. 86)

Most people living in big houses can see the beach because 'they have paid for it. Meanwhile, the people who live in a condominium, represented by Wallace, can only see the river's estuary. The view of the beach is contrasted to the view of the river, representing the gap and status of being a part of the high-class versus the low one. Those two contrasting sceneries are represented by Fowlkes as the contextual symbols in this short story, leading the readers to perceive that this gap ever exists in the USA, and those who have, boast it, leaving the poor feel uncomfortable and pessimistic.

Wallace is told as someone insecure and pessimistic with his life, especially after he is no longer successful in the world of boxing. Everything that he previously had and was fond of soon leaves him one by one. One of them is his partner, who chooses to leave him for someone better.

I made this possible for you, Wallace thought. It's because of me that you can marry a rich lawyer and stay home all day in a big house. You lived with a fighter once and had his baby and followed him into all sorts of bad decisions, so now no one can say you were always boring and domestic. (Boyle, 2015, p. 88-89)

The above excerpt is the sequence when Wallace speaks to himself thinking about his ex-partner, Kim, who, at that moment lives a more prosperous life with her new husband, a rich lawyer. Embracing the American dream and values, Kim has her right to choose who she is married to. By doing so, Kim can reach her better social status and life. What Kim does is indeed an American dream, in which a person can have upward mobility. Leaving Wallace who is in his lowest condition, to who is much better in social status, is the best choice for Kim, regardless of Wallace's condition after being left broken-hearted. In this case, Fowlkes portrays Wallace as someone that is

in his lowest point of life: being failed as a boxer, having no partner, feeling lonely, having nothing to show off. Presenting Wallace's inner conflict certainly makes this sequence of the event more dramatic to strengthen the condition that America is not always 'the land of dreams.'

To make it worse, Wallace always thinks that what happens in the past was merely his fault,

He was too old for Kim but he was loving and fair and kind to Wallace's daughter in a way that made Wallace feel like every decision he'd ever made with his own life had been wrong (Boyle, 2015).

Kim's new husband was old but loving and kind. This situation makes Wallace believe that he does not deserve to live with Kim and his daughter, and it is he who makes Kim go away from Wallace. Fowlkes creatively composed such a character as Wallace who always feels sorry for himself and whatever happens to him. The inner conflict between Wallace and himself with the showing mode of presentation creates a sad nuance for the readers, to sink in Wallace feeling guilty, ashamed, sorry, and all the insecurities in him.

Moreover, Molly, her daughter is also described as a girl who does not want to talk to his father

This was one of her new things, not talking to him. He felt like it was probably meant to get him to do all the talking, or maybe to punish him (Boyle, 2015).

The word 'punish' here is used, as if Wallace has made a huge mistake so that his daughter does not want to communicate with him. Fowlkes does not depict the details on the reasons why Kim and Molly leave Wallace. However, the way Fowlkes represents such a miserable character as Wallace might lead the readers to the assumption that it is super hard to be a boxer in the USA. Once you are successful as a boxer, you will get everything you want, but you can lose everything in a minute after you lose your fights.

After Kim left Wallace, they have a different 'world': Kim with his upper-class lifestyle, while Wallace is part of the middle class one. The following excerpt shows how Wallace thinks that their current world is separated by a big gap.

He got sick of hanging around and waiting so he went up to Coronado to see his daughter. The drive took ten minutes and ended in a different world. Coronado was somewhere people lived on purpose. Old people walked the sidewalks like they were keeping an eye on things. Even the dogs had nice haircuts.

Coronado, the place where his Kim and Molly live is satirically stated by Fowlkes as 'somewhere people lived on purpose'. This phrase indicates that Wallace thinks that his life is not on purpose, while Kim has. Fowlkes even exaggerated that dogs had nice haircuts in Coronado, a trivial thing someone does not think about, except when someone has much money and does not know how to spend, he or she might spend the money on his or her dog's hair. This excerpt also shows that Wallace feels insecure and being inferior compared to Kim and Molly. Fowlkes interestingly portrays Coronado as one of the settings of place, which is only a ten-minute ride from where Wallace lives, as the other world. This shows the readers that America is not a place that is the same from one place to the other places. There is no uniformity in the states or areas in the USA. Different places might mean a completely different way of life and society.

However, when Wallace almost gives up his American dream and plans to quit becoming a boxer, his coach reminds him of the dream as shown by the following excerpt:

... Tell me something: when you walked into the gym today, how'd it smell?"

"Like dreams and sunshine," Wallace said. "As always."

... The truth is, that's exactly how it felt... That smell of stale sweat, other people's feet. That same fight gym smell, but worse. Coach leaned forward and stretched his long arms out on the desk between them. He smiled that sad, conspiratorial smile of his. "When the smell of the

gym makes you sick," Coach said very slowly, emphasizing each syllable, "it's time to quit... (Boyle, 2015)

The gym is the place when Wallace has the training before he goes fighting. It functions not merely as the setting of the place, but it strengthens the theme of the American dream. The gym becomes the only place for Wallace to build his dream, peace by peace, by making himself stronger to fight his new opponent in the boxing ring. The gym becomes the place for Wallace to get up from his failure to reach his future success. However, after all, happens to him, it is not easy for Wallace to embrace the feeling of optimism to achieve the American dream. Unfortunately, Wallace cannot convey this truth to his coach. It seems that he does not have any other way to live his life. Being a boxer is his only choice.

The above excerpt also satirically states the coach's negligence of Wallace's condition at that time, from the phrase 'conspiratorial smile' from the coach to Wallace as if he said that on a hidden agenda. It has already been discussed in another part of this article that boxing is indeed a good business in the USA. A coach surely gains profit from this kind of business, especially from the fighters. Therefore, the coach motivates Wallace not to quit fighting, because he gets also the money from Wallace's fights, regardless of Wallace's physical and psychological condition. This is indeed a part of the American dream from the coach's point of view. He can be wealthy whatever the way is.

These situations discussed above depict that Wallace has a mix-up in his life. He cannot be himself; he thinks that it is hard to cope with the situation.

He needed a day or two with no Coach Vee, no Kim, and no Molly, no asshole neighbor. He needed a second to breathe. He needed some time to figure some things out, and he knew he wasn't going to get it. (Boyle, 2015)

Even in the USA, as the land of dreams, in which everyone can achieve everything he wants,

Wallace cannot do anything. This situation reflects that the USA is not always sweet. Anyone willing to be successful in that place should be really tough. Even a strong fighter like Wallace needs sometimes to digest everything that happens with him.

## CONCLUSION

Ben Fowlkes' *You'll Apologize If You Have To* (2015) portrays the bitterness and sweetness of living in the USA as a boxer. Living one's life in a boxing world does not guarantee that someone will be successful from the beginning to the end. Being a boxer surely relates to someone's physical condition. A boxer's success at the beginning of his carrier does not mean a boxer's success at the end of his carrier. This is reflected by Wallace, a professional boxer, who was able to achieve his best, but as time goes by, he lost everything in his lowest point of life.

It is interesting to analyze this short story, although this is a short story, which can be read in one sitting, this represents an everyday situation in a real life. Moreover, the author of this novel, Ben Fowlkes, is a writer for sports articles. Surely, he can depict the real-life situation of a boxer, a profession that few people comprehend its truth. One of which is when Wallace cannot get out of his job as a boxer. When Wallace feels that he cannot go further as a boxer, he is not able to say this truth to his coach, as if boxing is his only choice, a paradox of freedom as one of the American values. On the other hand, the coach also makes profits from Wallace, regardless of his condition.

Fowlkes, although simply describes the sequences of event, can lead the leaders to imagine the situation happened to Wallace. The touch of satires in this short story can lead the readers to think and grab the points by imagining the situation in detail. Wallace is the portrayal of an American who is not always easy to pursue all he wants. Thus, this condition might be a revelation that America is not as great as its jargon to be the land of dreams.

Of the four American values in pursuing material wealth: frugality, prudence, industry and prayer (Muhni, 2002), it is found out that prayer is

not depicted in this short story. This is not a shocking finding because being religious (or not) is a private thing, and it is common not to make it as a commodification such thing in a literary work, especially short stories. However, the other American values are portrayed in the characters and plot, supported by the setting in this short story.

The title *You'll Apologize If You Have To* (2015) refers to Wallace's perspective that selfishness and anger can be the solution to his unexpected reality which is in contrast with his expectation. However, he can be the one who can apologize to himself by not being selfish and try to respect and love himself and all his struggles. Finally, he accepts reality and makes peace with himself - his being insecure and inferior. He can endure the facts about him related to his coach, ex-partner, daughter, and neighbor. This short story depicts that American dreams can be considered as a paradox because not all Americans can easily get them.

It is suggested for the next researchers to see the other aspects of the short story from the psychological approach. This short story is rich with such feelings as anxiety, loneliness, and the characters' struggles to get over it. Also, researching cultural studies in American boxing is suggested. Many data are portrayed in boxing as a profitable business in the USA. The phenomenon of capitalism is also one of the issues in this short story, which can be valuable data related to the research on capitalism in society.

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