

Fences

by August Wilson



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Introductory Lecture

Fences is set in August Wilson's hometown, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The play is part of his Pittsburgh Cycle, a collection of stage dramas set in each of the decades of the twentieth century. A rich examination of the complexities of identity, *Fences* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1987.

The play opens in 1957, during the very early stages of the civil rights movement. President Truman desegregated the military in 1948 by executive order. In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregated schools, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. organized the Montgomery Bus boycott in 1955, leading to the Supreme Court's decision in 1956 to desegregate buses. In 1957, the Little Rock Nine were escorted through angry crowds by the United States Army as these African-American students realized Brown's promise of integrated classrooms. It is important to note that all of these early civil rights victories were the result of direct action by the federal government. At that point in the United States' history, popular opinion had yet to shift toward racial equality, and African Americans were still largely disenfranchised. However, the "hot winds of change," as Wilson notes in his introduction to the play, would soon sweep through American society. It is the historical context of the 1950s that informs the characters and conflicts in *Fences*.

In Wilson's introduction to the drama, he establishes a broader historical context for the play, drawing a contrast between the European immigrants to Pittsburgh and the African Americans who came to the North as part of the Great Migration after the Civil War and through the early twentieth century. Wilson describes a sort of social contract that existed between the city and the European immigrants: "The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true." In contrast, Wilson notes that African Americans in the city "collected wood and rags." For European immigrants, the American Dream could become a reality; for African Americans, it had been an impossibility.

Troy Maxson, the protagonist in *Fences*, is a fifty-three-year-old African American garbage collector whose dream had been denied. As a young man, Troy had been an exceptionally talented baseball player in the Negro Leagues and had dreamed of playing in the Major Leagues, an opportunity denied him because of racial segregation in the sport. Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball in 1947, but the milestone arrived too late for Troy. He had missed his chance. Years later, he still practices his swing, hitting a ball made of rags that hangs from a tree in his yard.

Troy's bitterness at having been denied an opportunity for a career in Major League Baseball damages his relationship with his son, Cory, who is being recruited to play college football. Troy refuses to allow Cory to pursue his dream of playing football, insisting that he learn a trade instead. "That way you have something can't nobody

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Introductory Lecture

take away from you,” he says to Cory. A sharecropper’s son, Troy believes that being free is having something that cannot be taken away. Cory, growing up in a different era, believes that he will have civil rights and opportunities as an African American that Troy does not allow himself to imagine.

The title of Wilson’s play directs attention to the central symbol in the drama, one that can be interpreted figuratively in numerous ways. Do fences protect the Maxsons, as when Rose, Troy’s wife, sings, “Jesus, be a fence all around me every day”? Do “good fences make good neighbors,” as Robert Frost once wrote, and therefore mark Troy’s territory as his own? Or do fences create barriers in relationships and constrain the fulfillment of dreams? As Troy builds a fence in his yard, the other “fences” he has encountered and constructed in his life drive the play.

Some of the themes in *Fences*, such as tension between reality and dreams and between parent and teenage child are timeless. Other aspects of the play seem timely. More recently in American history, fences and the American Dream are associated with immigration debates, and events such as Hurricane Katrina and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement have drawn attention to disparities between the lives of African Americans and those of white Americans. Through an African-American family of another era, Wilson develops themes that continue to reverberate in American society.

This drama is appropriate for high school students (grades 11–12) who are learning the history of the civil rights movement in the United States.

Objectives

By the end of this unit, students should be able to:

- discuss the symbolism of fences and baseball as they relate to Troy, Cory, and the African-American experience during the early civil rights movement.
- identify dialogue that points to an increased desire for civil rights and equality for African Americans.
- identify and discuss several dichotomies in the play, including young vs. old, new vs. old, and dreams vs. reality.
- discuss how Troy's past as a sharecropper's son and a Negro Leagues player informs his viewpoints and actions.
- identify reflections of the budding feminist movement in the character of Rose.
- analyze and describe the complexities of the identities of Troy, Cory, and Rose.
- analyze and describe major conflicts in the play.

Common Core Standards

The discussion questions vary in degree of difficulty.

RL.11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RL.11-12.2: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL.11-12.3: Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

RL.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

RL.11-12.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

RL.11-12.10: By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

ESL and Differentiated Instruction

This eNotes Lesson Plan is designed so that it may be used in numerous ways to accommodate ESL students and to differentiate instruction in the classroom.

Study Guide:

- The Study Guide is organized to study each scene in the play; the author's introduction to the play is also addressed. Pages in the Study Guide may be assigned individually and completed at a student's own pace.
- Study Guide pages may be used as pre-reading activities to preview for students the vocabulary words they will encounter in reading the introduction, Act I, and Act II and to acquaint students generally with the content of each section.
- Before Study Guide pages are assigned, questions may be selected from them to use as short quizzes to assess reading comprehension
- Study Guide vocabulary lists include words from the novella that vary in difficulty.
 - The vocabulary lists for each section are sufficiently comprehensive so that shorter lists of vocabulary words can be constructed from them.
 - Working from the vocabulary lists, the teacher also may construct vocabulary studies for individual students, choosing specific words from each section of the text that are most appropriate for them.

Discussion Questions:

The questions vary in degree of difficulty.

- Some questions require higher levels of critical thinking; others engage students with less challenging inquiry.
- Individual discussion questions may be assigned to students working in pairs or in small study groups; their contributions may then be added to a whole-class discussion.

Multiple-Choice/Essay Test:

Test questions also vary in degree of difficulty.

- Some multiple-choice questions address the factual content of the play; others require students to employ critical thinking skills, such as analyzing, comparing, contrasting, and drawing inferences.
- The teacher may select specific multiple-choice questions and one or more essay questions to assess an individual student's understanding of the play.
- The essay portion of the test appears on a separate page so that it may be omitted altogether in testing.

Instructional Focus – Teaching the Literary Elements

Before students read through the play, explain that **themes** are universal ideas developed in literature. Point out that these themes are developed in the play; discuss them with students as they read and/or after they finish reading:

- Dreams vs. realities
- Growing up/coming of age
- Conflict between father and son
- Betrayal
- Responsibility
- Rights
- Identity

Talk with your students about how a **motif** is a recurring pattern or repeated action, element, or idea in a work of literature. As they read the play, have them pay attention to the following motifs:

- Baseball
- Race and civil rights
- Death
- Flowers, gardens, crops, growth
- Leaving home
- Religious practice

A **symbol** is a concrete object or place that has significance in a literary work because it communicates an idea. Have students discuss how the author develops the following symbols and what ideas the symbols could suggest. Have them look for other symbols on their own.

- Fences
- The devil
- Trains

Main Characters

Troy Maxson: Troy is fifty-three years old when *Fences* begins, an African-American garbage collector in Pittsburgh who was once a baseball star in the Negro Leagues. The son of a sharecropper, he migrated from the South when he was fourteen. Known for telling lively, humorous stories, Troy is also bitter and angry—stemming from his experiences with racism, most notably having been excluded from Major League Baseball because he is an African American. He is a staunch believer in responsibility and is concerned with the realities of life. He discourages both of his sons in their chosen careers.

Rose Maxson: Rose is Troy's wife and Cory's mother. A devoted wife to Troy, she is one of the few people who know him well. Rose is recognized for her wisdom and loyalty.

Cory Maxson: Cory is Troy's seventeen-year-old son. He is a football star in high school and is being scouted to play college football. Cory is generally optimistic about his opportunities as an African-American athlete and resents Troy's interfering with his future. Cory has a troubled, conflicted relationship with his father.

Gabriel Maxson: Gabriel (Gabe) is Troy's brother. Wounded in World War II, he suffers from brain damage and believes he is the Angel Gabriel. Until recently, he lived in Troy's house. He now rents rooms with Ms. Pearl, a storekeeper.

Lyons Maxson: Lyons is Troy's oldest son, born before Troy met Rose. Lyons does not live with Troy, but he frequently visits on payday to borrow money from his father. Although Troy chides Lyons for not having a steady job—Lyons is a jazz musician—Troy lends his son money.

Bono: Bono is Troy's best friend. They have been friends since their prison days before Troy met Rose. Bono frequently calms Troy down and offers him advice. Like Rose, Bono is one of the few people who understand Troy.

Raynell Maxson: Raynell is Troy's youngest daughter, born from an affair but raised by Rose. Raynell is a baby at the beginning of the play and seven years old in the last scene, set in 1965.

Plot Summary

Fences begins in 1957 at the home of the Maxsons, an African-American family living in Pittsburgh. Troy Maxson works for the city as a garbage collector, Rose is a homemaker, and their son, Cory, attends high school, plays on the football team, and works at the A&P. Lyons, Troy's adult son from a previous relationship, drops by regularly to borrow money from his father; an unemployed musician, Lyons rejects the idea of holding down a steady job. The primary conflicts in the play develop from Troy's relationship with Rose and with his sons. Also a source of conflict is Troy's relationship with his brother, Gabe, who was left brain-damaged by the war.

Troy's personal history informs much of his thinking and behavior. Driven from his home as a boy by his abusive father (a harsh, frustrated sharecropper), Troy settled in the North where African Americans lived in urban poverty and couldn't find jobs. Troy committed criminal acts to survive, and after killing a man, went to prison. In prison, he learned to play baseball. An exceptionally talented athlete, he played ball in the Negro Leagues after leaving prison and dreamed of playing in the Major Leagues, an opportunity denied him because baseball was racially segregated at the time.

Troy remains bitter about missing his chance for a career in the Major Leagues, but his spirit has not been broken. A large, boisterous man who tells a good story and teases Rose and his friend Bono with affection, he works hard to support his family, values personal responsibility, and stands up for himself at work, winning a promotion after filing a legitimate grievance with the union.

However, Troy's past and the ways it influences him eventually destroy his relationships with his family. He belittles Lyons for chasing a career in music and berates him for being irresponsible. He has great sympathy for Gabe, but he uses money from Gabe's disability benefits to buy the Maxson house and eventually has his brother committed to a mental hospital. Betraying Rose, he has an affair, irreparably damaging their marriage. When the woman dies in childbirth, Troy brings his baby girl home; Rose raises the baby with devotion but ends her commitment to Troy. His relationship with Cory ends when Troy sabotages Cory's dream of playing football in college; convinced that Cory's dream will be denied as his had been, Troy refuses to sign the college recruitment form and makes Cory quit the high school football team. Cory's anger and resentment fester, leading to a physical confrontation with his father and Troy's throwing him out of the house for good. Emotionally crippled by his heritage and his circumstances, Troy builds fences between himself and those he loves.

The play ends with Troy's death seven years later as the family gathers at the Maxson house for his funeral. Cory has joined the Marines, Lyons has matured after having been in trouble with the law, and Troy's baby, Raynell, has grown into a lovely little girl, the center of Rose's life. Gabe is in attendance, too, still lost in the delusion that he is the Archangel Gabriel. Troy's tragic flaws, well established in the drama, are not

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Study Guide — Teacher Edition

“The Play” (Introduction to Fences)

Vocabulary

destitute: without the basic necessities of life

devoured: ate hungrily and quickly

eloquence: fluency in expression

guile: sly or cunning intelligence

provocative: causing discussion, thought, argument, and strong reactions

ramshackle: in a state of severe disrepair

solidified: made solid and strong

tenacious: keeping a firm and determined hold on something

turbulent: characterized by conflict, disorder, or unrest

vengeful: seeking to harm someone in return for being injured

Reading Comprehension and Discussion Questions

1. **Compare and contrast the experiences of Europeans and African Americans in the city at the turn of the twentieth century. Include specific details from “The Play” in your response.**

According to the text, European immigrants were “devoured” by the city. They worked in factories (“a thousand furnaces and sewing machines, a thousand butcher shops and bakers’ ovens”). They fed the city and “swelled its belly.” However, the relationship between Europeans and the city is described as a “partnership.” The dreams of European immigrants were “dared and won true.”

In contrast, African-American immigrants—descendants of slaves coming from the South—“were offered no such welcome or participation.” In fact, they were “rejected” by the city and reduced to living outside the mainstream of life in the city. They “fled” the city and ended up living poorly at the side of the river or under the bridge. They worked, not making things as the Europeans did, but serving people.

2. **African Americans who migrated to the city are described as having “vengeful pride.” Why might they have felt “vengeful”?**

Being vengeful means that one wants to harm someone else in retaliation for having been wronged. Since African Americans experienced a harsh existence because of racism, their having “vengeful pride” can be seen as feeling angry because society tried to diminish them.

3. **In “The Play,” Wilson describes the pursuit of the American Dream. What is the American Dream? How does it relate to the history of African Americans at the turn of the century?**

The American Dream is the idea that by working hard, one can succeed in America and fulfill one’s particular dreams. European immigrants were able to achieve their dreams, but African Americans were not. They came “strong, eager, searching,” but despite working hard, they still “lived in pursuit of their own dream.”

4. **Describe America in the 1950s. How would the next decade, the 1960s, be different?**

By 1957, the “industrial might of America” had been established, and World War II had been won. Life was “rich, full, and flourishing.” The 1960s, when the “hot winds of change” would begin to blow, would be a “turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade.”

Study Guide — Student Edition

“The Play” (Introduction to Fences)

Vocabulary

destitute: without the basic necessities of life

devoured: ate hungrily and quickly

eloquence: fluency in expression

guile: sly or cunning intelligence

provocative: causing discussion, thought, argument, and strong reactions

ramshackle: in a state of severe disrepair

solidified: made solid and strong

tenacious: keeping a firm and determined hold on something

turbulent: characterized by conflict, disorder, or unrest

vengeful: seeking to harm someone in return for being injured

Reading Comprehension and Discussion Questions

1. Compare and contrast the experiences of Europeans and African Americans in the city at the turn of the twentieth century. Include specific details from “The Play” in your response.
2. African Americans who migrated to the city are described as having “vengeful pride.” Why might they have felt “vengeful”?
3. In “The Play,” Wilson describes the pursuit of the American Dream. What is the American Dream? How does it relate to the history of African Americans at the turn of the century?
4. Describe America in the 1950s. How would the next decade, the 1960s, be different?

Test

Part I: Multiple Choice Test

1. Where and when is *Fences* primarily set?

- a. Pittsburgh, 1980s
- b. Unknown city, 1960s
- c. Pittsburgh, 1950s
- d. Unknown city, early 1900s

2. How did Troy pay for the Maxson family home?

- a. He bought the home on credit from Miss Pearl.
- b. He used his savings from playing baseball.
- c. Rose gave him money.
- d. He used Gabriel's disability benefit from the government.

3. How did Troy get a promotion?

- a. He asked his boss why only white workers were drivers.
- b. He was awarded Employee of the Month three months in a row.
- c. Bono and his co-workers nominated him.
- d. He is a friend of the boss.

4. Where did Troy learn baseball?

- a. As a child in the South
- b. While migrating North
- c. In the military
- d. In prison

5. Which two groups of people are compared in "The Play" section of *Fences*?

- a. Native Americans and African Americans
- b. White musicians and African-American musicians
- c. White garbage men and black garbage men
- d. White immigrants and African-American migrants

6. What analogy does Wilson use to describe The City in "The Play"?

- a. A baseball game
- b. An oven
- c. A war
- d. A prison

7. Which era is NOT discussed in *Fences*?

- a. The American Revolution
- b. The Great Migration after the Civil War
- c. The 1900s-1920s wave of European Immigrants
- d. The Civil Rights Movement

8. Which two materials does Wilson associate with African-Americans in "The Play" section?

- a. Blood and bone
- b. Paper and water
- c. Wood and rag
- d. Iron and stone

9. What causes Troy to "taunt Death" at the end of act two, scene two?

- a. Rose throws him out.
- b. Alberta dies.
- c. The baby dies.
- d. Cory leaves.

10. What is the meaning of "atavistic"?

- a. Holy
- b. Ancestral
- c. Artistic
- d. Referential

11. Which of the following characters in the play represents the motif of Christianity?

- a. Cory
- b. Troy
- c. Gabriel
- d. Bono

12. Who equates Jesus to a fence?

- a. Raynell
- b. Gabriel
- c. Troy
- d. Rose

13. Which motif does Rose reference when speaking about her early relationship with Troy in her "What about my life?" speech in act two, scene one?

- a. Death
- b. Race
- c. Gardens
- d. Religious practice

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Part II: Essay Questions

1. Themes, Motifs and Symbols

Choose two themes and one motif or symbol from the list below. For each literary device you choose, discuss two examples of that literary device in *Fences*. Examples can include setting, plot, dialogue/stage directions, and/or characters. Explain why each example is an example of the theme, motif, or symbol.

Themes (discuss two from the list below)

- Dreams vs realities
- Growing up/coming of age
- Conflict between father and son
- Betrayal
- Responsibility
- Rights
- Identity

Motifs and Symbols (discuss one from the list below)

- Race and civil rights (motif)
- Death (motif)
- Flowers, gardens, crops, growth (motif)
- Leaving home (motif)
- Religious practice (motif)
- The Devil (symbol)
- Trains (symbol)

2. Text Analysis

(i) At different times in the play, Rose and Troy each talk about a fence. Using what you know about the characters, as well as the dialogue below, compare and contrast Rose's and Troy's views about the function of a fence.

ROSE (act one, scene two): (Sings) Jesus, be a fence all around me every day / Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way. / Jesus, be a fence all around me every day.

TROY (act two, scene two): Alright . . . Mr. Death. See now. . . I'm gonna tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna take and build me a fence around this yard. See? I'm gonna build me a fence around what belongs to me. And then I want you to stay on the other side. See? You stay over there until you're ready for me.

(ii) In act two, scene three, Troy brings Raynell to Rose. How are the stage directions at the beginning of the scene a metaphor for the plot of *Fences*? The stage directions read as follows:

"The lights come up on the Porch. It is late evening three days later. ROSE sits listening to the ball game waiting for TROY. The final out of the game is made and ROSE switches off the radio. TROY enters the yard carrying an infant wrapped in blankets. He stands back from the house and calls."

3. Character Analysis

Does Wilson portray Troy as a good husband, father, and brother? Use specific details from *Fences* to support your discussion.

Supplemental Resources

I. Fences in Historical Context: The Civil Rights Movement

Suggested Teacher Resources (suitable for converting into classroom materials):

“The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow” online exhibit from PBS: (<https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/>)

- Excellent overview of the development of Jim Crow after the end of slavery through the mid-1950s, with opportunities for deeper investigation
- Interactive activities, lesson plans, and teacher resources

Findlaw Civil Rights Timeline: (<http://civilrights.findlaw.com/civil-rights-overview/civil-rights-timeline-of-events.html>)

- Detailed timeline with focus on legal and political landmarks, 1857-2003
- Includes important events and legislation on women’s rights, ability rights, LGBTQ rights, and civil rights for various ethnic and racial groups

“Civil Rights Act of 1964” online exhibit from Library of Congress: (<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/index.html>)

- In-depth, interactive exhibit that focuses on the landmark nature of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, 1900s-Modern Day

Multimedia: (<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/multimedia.html>)

“Civil Rights Act of 1964” online exhibit from Library of Congress: (https://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/timeline/p_4.html)

- Simple, straightforward timeline from 1950-1966

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