Fences Study Guide

Fences by August Wilson

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

The first staged reading of August Wilson's play *Fences* occurred in 1983 at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center's National Playwright's Conference. Wilson's drama opened at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1985 and on Broadway at the 46th Street Theatre in1987. *Fences* was well-received, winning four Antoinette ("Tony") Perry Awards, including best play. The work also won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the John Gassner Outer Critics' Circle Award. Wilson was also selected as Artist of the Year by the *Chicago Tribune.*

Fences was a huge success with both critics and viewers, and it drew black audiences to the theatre in much larger numbers than usual. Because the play had four years of pre-production development before it opened on Broadway, Wilson had a chance to tighten and revise the action, watching his characters mature into lifelike creations. James Earl Jones played the role of Troy in the first staging of *Fences* on Broadway. Jones-and many black audience members-recognized and identified with Wilson's use of language to define his black characters. In an interview with Heather Henderson in *Theater,* Jones stated that "Few writers can capture dialect as dialogue in a manner as interesting and accurate as August's."

Reviewers also noted Wilson's ability to create believable characters. In his review for *Newsweek,* Allan Wallach noted that it is the men who dominate the script and bring it to life-singling out Jones, whom Wallach noted, is at his best "in the bouts of drinking and bantering, it is Jones's performance that creates "a rich portrait of a man who scaled down his dreams to fit inside his run-down yard." Clive Barnes, writing for the *New York Post,* said that Wilson provides "the strongest, most passionate American dramatic writing since Tennessee Williams" *(Cat on a Hot Tin Roof). Fences,* said Barnes, "gave me one of the richest experiences I have ever had in the theater."

Author Biography

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel, on April 27, 1945, in a ghetto area of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, known as "The Hill." Wilson's white father, a German baker named August Kittel, abandoned the family when Wilson was a child. Wilson's mother, Daisy Wilson Kittel, worked as a cleaning woman to raise her six children. Later, after Wilson's mother had remarried, his stepfather moved the family to a while neighborhood where Wilson was subjected to unbridled racism. At age 15, Wilson dropped out of school after being falsely accused of plagiarism; after that episode, he continued his education on his own, with periods of extensive reading at the public library.

Wilson began his career writing poetry and short stories but switched to drama in 1978 when he was invited to write plays for a black theatre in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Several fellowships enabled Wilson to concentrate on writing plays as a full time venture. Although his early efforts, *Fullerton Street* (1980), *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (1981),and *Jitney* (1982) received little attention. he gained recognition with his 1984 play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,* which was accepted for a staged reading at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center's National Playwright's Conference in 1982. The following year, *Fences* was also presented at the O'Neill conference and in 1986 *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* became Wilson's third play to be produced at the conference.

Each of these plays followed their initial readings at the O'Neill with productions at the Yale Repertory Theatre and later stagings on Broadway. In 1987, *The Piano Lesson* opened at the Yale Repertory Theatre; *Two Trains Running* followed three years later. Wilson's *Seven Guitars* opened at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in 1995, Wilson has stated that he envisions his plays as representative of the black experience in America, since each play is set in a different decade.

Wilson married for the first time in 1969, but the marriage ended after three years and the birth of a daughter, Sakina Ansari. He married for a second time in 1981: this marriage ended in 1990. Wilson has won several honors for his writing. including the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, an Antoinette ("Tony") Perry Award, and a Pulitzer Prize for *Fences: The Piano Lesson* was also awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1990. Several of his other works have been nominated for Tony Awards.

Plot Summary

Act I, Scene 1

The play opens with Troy and Bono engaged in their usual Friday night ritual of drinking and talking. Troy has made a formal complaint to his bosses that only white men are permitted to drive the garbage trucks for the waste disposal company at which both men work. The two men finish their discussion of work, and Bono asks Troy about a woman, Alberta, he suspects Troy of seeing. Troy denies that he would risk losing his wife, Rose, but Bono does not give up so easily and reminds Troy that he has been seen at Alberta's house when he said he was elsewhere.

Their conversation is interrupted by Troy's wife, Rose, who enters the yard. Their conversation about where to shop is interrupted by Lyons's entrance. Lyons is Troy's son by a previous marriage. He has come by because he knows that his father gets paid on Fridays; he is in need of a loan and asks his father for ten dollars. Troy pointedly notes that Lyons needs to get a job. Lyons's reply is that his father had no hand in raising him, and thus, he has no right to chastise or complain about how Lyons is living his life. Rose intervenes and gives Lyons the money.

Act I, Scene 2

Rose is hanging clothes on the line. Troy enters and they begin to banter about Rose's habit of playing numbers (a form of betting, like a lottery). Troy thinks it foolish and a waste of money, but Rose finds this little bit of gambling to be a harmless diversion that occasionally offers a small reward.

Their conversation moves to Troy's inquiry about the presence of their son, Cory. At that moment, Troy's brother, Gabriel, enters the yard. He is singing and carrying a bow I of discarded fruit and vegetables that he has picked up and is now attempting to sell. Gabriel was injured in the war and is now mentally disabled. Gabriel is warned that his older brother is angry that he has moved out and into his own place. As Gabriel exits, still singing, Rose reassures Troy that he has done all he can to care for his brother.

Act I, Scene 3

Four hours later, Rose is taking the dried clothes down from the line. Cory enters and is directed by his mother to get into the house and start the chores that he ignored when he went to football practice.

Troy enters the yard and after hearing that Cory is home, yells for his son to come out of the house. An argument ensues between father and son about Cory's concentration on football at the expense of his other obligations: school, chores, and a part-time job he has just quit. Troy demands complete control over Cory and insists that he quit football.

Cory responds by asking his father why he doesn't like his son. Troy evades a direct answer, and, instead, he replies that his son is provided with a home and food because he, Troy, fulfills his responsibility to his family. The confrontation ends with Troy telling Cory to get back down to the supermarket and get his Job back.

When Rose returns, Troy explains that he wants his son to do better than his father and to have a better job than that of a garbage man. Rose tries to soften Troy by reminding him that he missed his chance to be a professional athlete because he was too old, but Troy is unwilling to admit that she is right. The scene ends with Troy's declaration that he simply moves through life, existing from one Friday night to the next.

Act I, Scene 4

It is another Friday night, two weeks later, and Cory is on his way to play football. He ignores Rose when she confronts him about the chores he has left undone and states that he'll do them later. Troy and Bono enter the yard after Cory leaves, and Troy announces that he has been made a driver. At that moment Lyons comes to repay the money he borrowed two weeks ago. Most of this scene is devoted to the issue of Cory's future.

Troy launches into an autobiographical story that explains much of his behavior. The audience learns about Troy's brutal father and that he has been on his own since he was fourteen. The audience also learns that Troy spent fifteen years in jail and that is where he met Bono. The scene ends with a confrontation between Troy and Cory, who has just entered the yard. Troy accuses Cory of lying and orders him to get his old job back and quit the football team.

Act II, Scene 1

Troy has just returned from bailing Gabriel out of jail. Bono is with him, and, in response to his friend's concern about Rose, Troy admits that he has been seeing another woman and that she is going to have his baby. Rose enters the yard as Bono is leaving. Troy realizes that with a child coming, he must accept responsibility for what he has done. He tells Rose that he is to be the father to another woman's child. His response to her anger and pain is an admission that the other woman offers an escape from his responsibilities. She makes him forget the endless repetition of his life for a few moments. The scene ends in a confrontation between Rose, Troy, and Cory that stops just short of physical violence.

Act II, Scene 2

It is six months later, and It is clear that the relationship between Rose and Troy has been severed. Although Troy gives !us wife his paycheck, he is spending almost all his time with Alberta. Troy and Rose argue, but their fight is interrupted by a phone call telling them that the baby has been born but that the mother has died. The scene ends

with Troy yelling at death, vowing to build a fence around his house and those he loves to keep death away.

Act II, Scene 3

Troy returns with the infant, who he has named Raynell, and he and Rose agree that she will raise the child, who should not be punished for her parents' sins.

Act II, Scene 4

It is two months later and much has changed. Cory has graduated and is looking for a job, but Lyons tells him that jobs are scarce. Rose is busy with her church activities; she has found something to fill the space within that Troy had occupied before his deception. A brief conversation between Troy and Bono reveals that the two friends have drifted apart. Troy is a driver and Bono is still picking up the trash on a different route. After Bono leaves, Cory returns and there is a final argument between father and son. Clearly Cory blames Troy for his mother's pain and for his own disappointment. The argument turns violent when Cory attempts to strike at Troy with a baseball bat, he misses and Troy seizes the bat but stops just short of striking his son. In the end, Cory leaves the house for good, and Troy ends the scene with a taunt for death to come.

Act II, Scene 5

It is seven years later and the family has gathered for Troy's funeral. Cory arrives in his marine uniform. When he states that he will not go to Troy's funeral, his mother convinces him that he has an obligation to go. But it is the Singing of Troy's favorite song with the child, Raynell, that really convinces Cory to put the past behind him. The scene ends with all the principal characters in the yard. Gabriel announces he has come to blow the trumpet for Troy's admittance to Heaven through St. Peter's gate. The horn's mouthpiece is broken, however, and instead Gabriel begins to dance and howl as the stage darkens.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

On a Friday night in 1957, Troy and Bono get together for their traditional payday beer and conversation. They talk about how a co-worker of theirs got caught trying to steal a watermelon and how the boss didn't do anything, which leads to a discussion about how Troy confronted his boss about white men being allowed to drive trucks while black men weren't. The conversation then turns back to the watermelon-stealing co-worker and a woman named Alberta that he had been seeing. Bono says Troy's been spending a lot of time with her as well, and when Troy tries to deny anything's going on, Bono says he's seen him hanging around her apartment. Troy protests that he's always looked at women but hasn't done anything about being with one since he married Rose. He then talks about how sexy he finds Alberta.

Rose appears, says she's cooking a chicken for dinner, and invites Bono to stay. He refuses, saying he's got to get home to his woman, Lucille. Troy tells Rose to go back in, saying they're talking man talk and that he'll be talking to her later, hinting that he'll be looking for sex. Rose tells him to never mind, and then she and Troy tell Bono how Rose talked Troy into marrying her. They joke about their house, which makes Bono talk about how lousy his first home was and wonder why he stayed there for so long. Rose comments that some people don't know that improving their lives is possible. They argue about the best place to buy groceries, where you get a good deal, or where they know you. This leads Troy to talk about how his and Rose's son Cory has a job down at the local supermarket, and Rose to comment that Cory's being scouted by a football recruiter. Troy says there's no money to be made by black men playing sports since the white men won't let the black men get ahead, and Bono talks about how Troy was the best baseball player around but never got visited by a recruiter. Rose tries to convince Troy that things are different, but Troy doesn't change his mind and takes a long drink of beer.

Rose tells Troy he's going to "drink himself to death," which makes Troy tell a long story about how he saw Death in person, stared him down, wrestled with him, and finally grabbed his sickle and threw it away. He finishes by saying that every time Death's presence shows up in his life, he digs down deep for more strength to defeat him again. Bono and Rose both comment on the tall tales Troy tells, and on how the stories get a little different each time they're told. Bono mentions the Devil, and Troy says that he's wrestled with him, too.

Lyons, Troy's son from an earlier marriage, comes in and greets Bono and Rose. Troy says he knows why Lyons is there and that Lyons knows he knows. Lyons then asks for money, which is exactly what Troy figured he was going to do. Bono talks about how Troy says he met the devil, and Troy tells the story of how he made a deal for some furniture that he's still paying off to this day, adding that he's too scared to break the deal because of what the devil might do to him. Lyons asks him again for the money,

Troy tells him to get a job, Lyons says he can't get a job, and Troy tells him that even though he wants to be a musician he's got to earn his living, so he can keep playing. Troy then gives his pay to Rose, Lyons asks Rose for the money and she gives it to him. Lyons promises to give it back, Troy says he'll never see it, and Lyons goes out. Rose tries to reassure Troy that "the boy" will be okay, but he reminds her that the boy is 34 years old. Bono finally leaves, saying he'll be back on Monday. Troy tells him to not come by since he loves Rose so much he'll still be making love with her.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

Several topics of conversation in this scene foreshadow events later in the play. These include the discussion of Troy's confrontation with the boss over who's allowed to drive the delivery trucks, which foreshadows his later promotion, and the discussion of Alberta, which foreshadows Troy's later relationship with her. Other foreshadowing occurs in the references to Cory's job at the supermarket and the promoter, which foreshadows the play's central conflict, and Troy's story about confronting Death, which recurs later in the play when Troy is forced to deal with the aftermath of Alberta's death.

The play's theme of the hopelessness of the black man's struggle for success is also introduced in this act through the discussions of who drives the trucks and the success, or lack thereof, of black men in sports. The action of the play, particularly the central conflict between Troy and Cory over football, combines with several vivid illuminations of Troy's character to suggest that at least in part that hopelessness is the result of black men's sabotaging themselves. This suggestion is reinforced by Rose's comment that some people don't know that they can better themselves, which foreshadows Troy's actions in keeping Cory from pursuing his dreams.

Troy's story about wrestling with Death has parallels with the Biblical story of Jacob, who wrestled with an angel, refused to give in even though the angel injured his thigh, and insisted that the angel bless him. This parallel suggests that an important aspect of Troy's struggle for success is the simultaneous struggle he faces with what seems to be God's will, the way he feels he has shaped God's will to fit his own, and the way that by his actions, such as bringing his illegitimate daughter into his home, he virtually demands blessings from God.

Troy's story about his deal with the devil, in which he describes the somewhat shady deal he made to get his furniture, functions on a couple of levels. First, it mirrors his relationship with Rose in that he wanted the furniture so badly, that he compromised himself financially. In the same way that he wanted Rose so badly, he compromised own powerful sexual appetites, which are mentioned in his conversation with Bono and revealed to be still very present when Troy's affair with Alberta results in her pregnancy. Second, the story of the devil represents how Troy compromised his ambitions of playing baseball to earn a living. Again, this foreshadows Troy's actions when he insists that Cory do the same thing.

Troy's roundabout way of giving money to Lyons reveals a key element of his character: his sense of responsibility toward his family. In spite of his protestations that Lyons needs to get a job, Troy still feels responsible for him and makes sure Lyons gets the money he needs even in a roundabout way. This scene therefore functions on two levels. First, it foreshadows his actions later in the play when he brings Alberta's daughter home to live with him and Rose. Second, it reveals a key contradiction within Troy's character.

On the one hand, Troy is clearly irresponsible himself sexually and financially, as illustrated throughout the play by his ongoing relationship with Alberta and his problems with money. On the other hand, he feels an overwhelming sense of total responsibility toward his children, a sense so strong that it almost destroys his two sons at the same time as it serves to give his daughter a home that she otherwise would not have had. In other words Troy is both a giver and a taker, but as the play reveals and as Rose tells him later, he's much more the latter than the former.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Rose is hanging clothes out to dry when Troy comes out of the house. Rose chats about how a neighbor won a small sum of money playing the lottery, but Troy complains that the lottery is a waste of money and how people who win spend money badly, anyway. He then asks where Cory is, saying he wants his help building the fence. When Rose says he's gone to football practice, Troy complains that Cory's lazy. Rose asks him why he's so cranky about everything.

Troy's brother Gabriel appears, carrying a trumpet. Gabriel thinks he's the Angel Gabriel, and when Rose asks him whether he wants any breakfast, he talks about how he and Saint Peter would sit down to a breakfast of biscuits every morning. Rose goes inside to fix some eggs. Gabriel talks about how Troy's and Rose's names are in Saint Peter's book, how his name isn't there because he's already died, and tells Troy that he doesn't need any breakfast since he's already eaten with Aunt Jemima. He suddenly hears the "hounds of hell" coming after him and runs off. Rose comes back out, and tells Troy that she's heard that Gabriel isn't eating right over at his new boarding house, but Troy tells her not to worry, he's fine. Their conversation reveals that Gabriel was injured in the war, that he's got a metal plate in his head, and that he received $3,000 from the government in compensation for his injury. When Rose urges Troy to not think about that money, Troy reminds Rose that that $3,000 paid for their house, and if he hadn't taken charge of the money they'd have no home. He goes out to listen to a ball game on the radio.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Two important symbols appear for the first time in this scene. The first is the fence, which represents Troy's determination to live his life according to what he believes is right. On one level, Troy strives to keep the influences of the world out, including Cory's football ambitions and Rose's playing the lottery, the way a fence keeps things out. On another level, though, the way Troy keeps Cory, Rose, and later his daughter close to him, making them live their lives on his terms, keeps them in the same way a fence keeps things in. The fact that at the end of the play the fence is in the same condition as it was in when the play started symbolizes how his ideals and dreams don't actually serve anybody, himself included.

The second symbol is Gabriel, who represents God and God's will. Troy's struggles to get Gabriel to what he wants him to, along with Troy's use of Gabriel's money, reinforce the earlier stated idea that Troy is struggling to bend God's will to his own. Meanwhile, Gabriel's presence at the end of the play represents how Troy is finally united with God, with his and God's will finally in harmony.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

As Rose takes the clothes off the line, Cory returns home from football practice. Rose warns him that Troy was angry that he went off without doing his chores, and tells him to hurry up and get started on them before Troy comes back. Cory goes inside to make himself a sandwich.

Troy returns and caresses Rose suggestively, but Rose tells him to leave her alone. Troy asks whether Cory's come home, and when Rose tells him he has Troy shouts for Cory to come out and talk to him. Rose goes back in the house. Troy then starts sawing wood for the fence, and a few moments later Cory comes out. Troy asks whether he's just getting back, and Cory casually says "yeah." Troy reminds him to call him "sir," then orders him to start helping with the fence. The two work in silence for a while, and then Cory starts making small talk about baseball. Troy complains that the white men are running the game and not letting blacks or Hispanics play to their potential. Cory refers to a couple of black players who are doing well, including Hank Aaron. Troy says Hank Aaron can't hit half as good as he can, Cory says he couldn't hit as well as Hank Aaron off white major league pitchers, and Troy says they had better pitchers in the Negro League. Cory talks about how the major league pitchers are pretty good, but Troy changes the subject.

Troy asks Cory to tell him about the recruiter. Cory tries to explain that if he's recruited he has a chance to go to college, keep playing football and maybe play professionally, but Troy tells him that he's got to go back and get a full-time job. Cory explains that he's still going to be working at the grocery store on weekends, but can't work full time because the manager already gave his job to somebody else. Troy angrily tells him to go out and find another job, saying that he's the boss and what he says goes. When Cory asks why Troy never liked him, Troy has a long speech in which he explains that he doesn't have to like Cory, but that Cory is a responsibility and that Cory should be glad that he puts a roof over his head and food in his mouth. He tells Cory that he'd better accept that. Cory goes inside.

Rose, who's overheard much of this conversation, asks Troy why he won't let Cory play football. Troy says he doesn't want his son to end up like him, frustrated at not being allowed to have a professional career. When Rose reminds him that the reason he didn't play in the major leagues was because he was too old, Troy says it was because he wasn't the right color. Rose tells him that all Cory wants is to hear Troy tell him he did a good job. Troy tells her that all he's got strength to do is go out, earn a living and bring the money home so he can support all the people who rely on him. He adds that once in a while he's got the energy to lie on top of her and "try to blast a hole into forever." He finishes by saying he doesn't have the energy for anything else and goes into the house.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

The key element of this scene is the insight it offers into the character of Troy. The first major insight comes in his speech to Cory about responsibility, which essentially sums up who Troy is, what he's all about, and why he acts the way he does toward Cory, Rose, and later to his daughter. His insistence upon being called sir suggests that he feels he deserves respect for fulfilling those responsibilities.

The second major insight involves his feelings about his failure to make the big leagues. It's clear he has a high opinion of his abilities. What is also clear is that he has such a low opinion of white people that he's unable to see Cory's very valid points. This is not to suggest that Troy's opinion is entirely wrong. It's undoubtedly true that for years many white people did everything they could to keep black people in their place. This scene, however, makes it clear that on some level Troy has decided that no matter what, white people are to blame for everything wrong about his life and for everything that might go wrong with his son's.

The third major insight about Troy comes in his speech to Rose in which he refers to blasting a hole in forever. This is a reference to the act of sexual intercourse, specifically to his ejaculating into her. On a poetic level, however, the phrase indicates that to Troy, having sex represents immortality, the hope of fathering a child and that child being a part of him that will eventually go on forever. This gives us an indication of how much he cares for his children, no matter what misguided choices that caring leads him to make. This, along with his aforementioned sense of responsibility, foreshadows what happens later in the play when he brings home the baby he fathered by Alberta.

Troy's comment about wanting Cory to not be like him is deeply ironic in that by doing what he's doing, Troy is making Cory exactly like him. Troy is also behaving toward his son in exactly the same way as he says white people behave towards him, keeping him from pursuing his dreams and realizing his potential. In the 1970's, Hank Aaron, the baseball player referred to by Cory, became the holder of the Major League record for career home runs.

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

Cory runs out, late for a game. Rose follows him, saying he left his room in a mess. Cory tells her that he was looking for his spikes, Rose tells him Troy will be angry when he sees the mess, Cory tells her he'll clean it up later, and Rose goes back into the house.

Troy and Bono come in, celebrating. Troy calls twice for Rose to come out, and when she finally does, he says she's supposed to come when she's called. Rose tells him she's not a dog, which leads Troy to tell a story and sing a song about an old dog of his named Blue. Rose says that that's an old story somebody else told, and asks how things went down at work. Troy tells her that he's been promoted to driver.

Lyons appears, and Troy asks why he isn't in jail, referring to a news story about how the club where Lyons plays got raided. Lyons says he was only there for the music, and says he just stopped by. Bono announces that Troy's got a promotion, and the conversation reveals that Troy is a garbage-man, and that Troy doesn't have a driver's license. Troy says that driving is easy, that he doesn't need a license, and that the boss doesn't need to know his business.

Lyons puts his hand in his pocket. Troy assumes he's back to ask for more money, but instead Lyons says he's come to pay back the $10 he borrowed earlier. Troy tells him to keep it, save it for the next time he wants to borrow money, but Lyons gives the money to Rose, who says that Troy can hand over his pay.

As Troy complains about how everybody manages his money for him, Gabriel comes in singing, and gives Rose a rose. Rose invites him and Lyons to stay for supper, but Gabriel says all he wants is a sandwich while Lyons says he'll finish after he's done playing. As Gabriel goes into the house he tells Lyons that Troy is mad at him, and Rose explains that Gabriel thinks Troy's mad because he (Gabriel) went to live in the boarding house. Troy says he's not mad and the reason the woman running the boarding house doesn't mind Gabriel's being around is that she doesn't mind the rent. He adds that Gabriel can come and go as he pleases over there just as he could at home. Rose angrily tells him that it's not the same thing and that she doesn't want to hear any more from him about it. She adds that when the recruiter comes, Troy is to sign the papers that would allow Cory to go to college. As she goes in, Troy tells her he's not going to do that.

Troy reveals to Bono and Lyons that he's been down to the supermarket and discovered that Cory hasn't been working there at all. He says that when a boy starts lying to his father it's time for that boy to get out. This leads him to remember his own father, who, he says, was selfish, insensitive, and angry at the world, but still did right by his responsibilities towards his family. He adds that his mother couldn't stand him and ran

off when he was eight, and then tells a long story about how his father beat him one day after discovering him with a girl, which he realized happened because his father wanted the girl for himself. He tried to beat his father, but was instead beaten until he was almost dead. He says he realized that was the time for him to leave, and he hasn't seen or heard from his father since.

Troy goes on to talk about how he walked to the nearest big city, which he thought would be a place where he could realize his dreams, but instead fell into a life of poverty and crime. He robbed people and accidentally killed a man, which landed him in prison where he met Bono, but he reformed for good when he was released and met and married Rose. Bono tells him he made a good choice and that Rose will keep him on the straight and narrow.

Lyons and Bono leave just as Cory returns, angry at Troy for telling the coach that he can't play football any more. Troy says that Cory didn't live up to his part of the agreement by keeping his job. Cory says he tried to explain that the boss at the grocery store was keeping his job for him but Troy never listened. Troy tells him that he had a chance to do the right thing, to do as he was told, but didn't. He says that was strike one and warns his son not to strike out.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

There are two main components to this scene. The first is the series of revelations of how Troy insists upon living life on his terms and that the other people in his life do the same. His promotion to driver reveals that to a point, living life on his terms has been successful. The revelation that he doesn't have a driver's license, however, reiterates how flawed his sense of self-righteousness is. Other revelations in this area are included in the conversation about Gabriel's choice to live in the boarding house, which implies that he moved to escape Troy's control, and the sequence of events around Cory's potential football career. Once again, it's clear that Troy is intent upon imposing his values upon his son, but by juxtaposing this incident with Troy's story about his encounter with his own father, we clearly see how Troy is treating his son in exactly the same way he was treated.

This is the second main component to the scene, the way that Troy is repeating the past without having really learned from it. We understand this from the story he tells about what happened between him and his father, which makes it clear that what Troy's father did to Troy, Troy does to Cory. Even though the beating Troy received is literal, the beating that Cory receives is figurative, and both beatings spring from the same source - fear of loss of control. Another parallel in these cross-generational relationships is revealed later in the play when we see that Cory has, like his father before him, left home to pursue his own life. The key difference, as will be revealed at the end of the play, is that Cory has done something more positive with his life than Troy did.

Another aspect of the story Troy tells about the beating is that it echoes his story of how he wrestled with death. We understand from these echoes that on some level, Troy

experienced his struggle with his father as a struggle with death, or at least a fight to live his own life. This means that the second half of the story, when he describes what happened when he got to the city, is actually the story of how he had to struggle to fight off death even longer.

Troy's criminal history adds another layer of depth to his character, illustrating how his temper often gets the better of him. This foreshadows his confrontations with Cory later in the play.

Troy's reference to baseball at the end of the act introduces the metaphoric aspect of the game in this play. The idea of strikes represents the repeated attempts at success and escape made by both Troy and Cory, while the idea of striking out represents the fear that both men have that they will end up like their respective fathers.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Cory is outside, swinging Troy's baseball bat. Rose comes out and asks for help in the kitchen. Their conversation reveals that Gabriel has been arrested, and Troy is down at the police station. Cory and Rose go in. After a moment, Troy and Bono appear. Rose comes out to meet them, and Troy tells her the police would release Gabriel only if Troy gave them $50 bail. This sets Troy off on another complaint about the way white people treat blacks. He then tells Rose to send Cory out to him. While they're waiting, Troy and Bono talk about the wood Troy is using for his fence, which leads to a conversation about the way old people used to do things and a brief discussion about how Troy's been spending a lot of time with Alberta.

Cory comes out, and Troy orders him to start sawing wood for the fence. Cory mutters that he doesn't know why Rose wants a fence in the first place. Bono comments that Rose wants to protect them because she loves them, and tells Troy to remember she's a good woman. Troy sends Cory into the house to find another saw, and when he's gone asks Bono what he means by talking about Rose that way. Bono tells him to be careful, to not get too involved with Alberta and to not hurt Rose. Troy tries to explain that Alberta latched onto him and he can't let her go, and also reminds Bono that he knows where his responsibilities lie. Bono doesn't buy it, and tells Troy that if he keeps on with two women, one way or another he's going to have to let one of them go. Troy says he hears what Bono's saying, and goes to work on the fence. Bono leaves.

Troy stops work when Rose comes out. She asks him what happened with Gabriel, and Troy tells her that he promised the judge he'd take care of him. She then tells him to come in for lunch, but Troy stops her, says he's got something to tell her, and confesses that he's gotten another woman, who we know is Alberta, pregnant. Before Rose can react, Gabriel comes in and gives her a flower, explaining that he was fighting the hellhounds and the "bad men" came and arrested him. Rose sends him into the house, and then when he's gone tells Troy how angry she is, saying she's been a good woman and a good wife to him.

Troy explains that being with Alberta makes him feel good, and he's not prepared to give that up. He goes on to talk in terms of baseball, how he was born with two strikes against him, made a hit when he met Rose, got to first base with Cory, and now with Alberta he feels so good that he feels like he could steal second after 18 years of being stuck standing on first. Rose tells him how she's been stuck for 18 years as well but always put her faith in him and in their marriage. She talks about her frustrations at having to let her own dreams go, at realizing that Troy's not the good man she thought he was, and at the way he's always taking from everybody around him. She starts to go into the house but Troy grabs her arm, angry that she's accusing him of being a taker when all along he's given to her, to Cory, to Lyons, to Gabriel, to everybody. Rose

struggles to free herself, but Troy holds her tight. Cory comes out and tries to free her. Troy, surprised at him, lets her go, and then tells Cory that he's just had strike two.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The symbol of the fence takes on another aspect in this scene. The revelation that the fence was Rose's idea represents the way in which Rose truly does have the best interests of her family at heart, while her leaving the construction of the fence up to Troy represents the way in which she's let him take the responsibility for deciding and acting upon what those best interests are. She finally acts in her own best interests and those of her family when she tries to stand up to him about the baby, but Troy's physical power and self-righteousness overwhelm her, as they've always done.

The symbol of baseball reappears in this scene, with Troy using the metaphor of stealing second to justify his spending time with Alberta. The irony of this metaphor is that it implies a huge risk, meaning that through his affair with Alberta, Troy is risking everything he's already gained in the same way that a baseball player stealing second risks being tagged out and sent to the bench. Once again, his sense of self-righteousness is so strong that he's unable to see that Rose has got a point. Meanwhile, Rose's argument that Troy's a taker is a valid one, although it might not appear so at first glance. Yes, Troy gives everything he makes over to his family, and yes, he does his best to make sure his family is taken care of and provided for. What he doesn't realize, which Rose does and which Cory will later, is that he takes their spirit, their independence, and their self-will away from them.

The confrontation between Troy and Cory has echoes of the story Troy told about the confrontation between him and his father. We see that Troy is unlike his father in at least one way when he backs off from actually striking his son.

Act 2, Scene 2/3

Act 2, Scene 2/3 Summary

Scene 2 - Troy is leaving for work, but Rose stops him. Their conversation reveals that it's been months since the revelation of Troy's affair with Alberta, that Troy's been home every night but only long enough to change his clothes and go out again, and that Rose has had enough. Troy tells her he's doing the best he can, and that he's going over to the hospital to visit Alberta, who's just gone in to have her baby. Rose tells him that Gabriel, who'd been back living at the boarding house, had been taken away to an asylum. She adds that she saw the papers Troy signed authorizing the removal, which also authorized the government to send half of Gabriel's disability check to the home and half to Troy. Troy denies ever having done that, but as she goes in to answer the phone Rose continues to insist that she saw the papers. Troy paces, trying to figure out what to say next.

Rose returns with the news that Alberta died giving birth, and the hospital wants Troy to go around and collect her baby girl. Troy can't believe it. Rose wonders who's going to bury her, and Troy tells her not to worry, Alberta wasn't alone in the world. Rose comments that she knows Alberta wasn't alone, and then asks Troy to not push her away. Troy says all he needs is some time to figure things out. Rose goes inside. Troy speaks to Death, warning him that he's going to finish the fence around the yard, and that next time he comes to call he can come to the front door and see what Troy is really made of. Troy says he'll be ready, and goes out.

Scene 3 - A few days later Rose is sitting on the porch when Troy returns with the baby. He asks for Rose's help in taking care of her, but Rose goes into the house. Troy sits on the porch, and speaking loudly enough for Rose to hear, tells his daughter all he's done is his best, that he can't be faulted for that, and that he's going to take care of her because it's his responsibility. He sings a lullaby as Rose comes out and listens. He pleads again for her help, saying the baby hasn't done anything to hurt her. Rose says she'll take care of her, but from that moment on Troy is a "womanless man."

Act 2, Scene 2/3 Analysis

This scene illustrates again how ruthless Troy can be in asserting control over his family when we hear how Gabriel's been taken away to an institution. Like Rose, we don't really believe Troy's denials, since it's been revealed that he's done exactly the same kind of thing to Gabriel before, when he took the $3,000 compensation. At the same time, we also see the powerful sense of responsibility he feels toward his family when he brings home his baby daughter. This scene also reveals a tender side to him we haven't seen before. As a result, Troy becomes an extremely complex character, deeply flawed, as evidenced by his desperation for control, but also deeply decent, as evidenced by his sense of responsibility.

Troy's challenge to Death follows through on the foreshadowing earlier in Troy's earlier stories about death. Because the earlier story, as we've seen, represents his relationship with his father, his challenge to death in this scene is a symbolic challenge to his father in that he's saying that he's not going to be the same kind of father to this new baby as he (his father) was to him.

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

Lyons comes and shouts for Rose. Rose comes out, telling him to be quiet before he wakes up Raynell (the baby). Lyons says he just came by to give Troy the $20 he owes him. Rose tells him to put the money on the table where Troy will find it. Just as Lyons leaves, Cory comes in. Their conversation reveals that Cory has graduated high school, and has been out looking for a job but has been unable to find one. Lyons tells him to talk to Troy, who he says "knows people" and can find him a job. Lyons goes out, Rose goes into the house, and Cory is left alone with Troy's baseball bat. He tries a couple of swings, but it doesn't feel right. Troy appears and watches him. Cory gives up and goes out.

Troy starts to go into the house just as Rose comes out carrying the baby and a cake. She tells him she's taking it down to a bake sale at the church, tells him to leave the money on the table so she'll be able to take care of it, and to leave the other cakes in the kitchen alone, since they're also for the bake sale. Rose goes out, and Troy sings to himself the song about the dog he sang earlier.

Bono stops by on his way to a domino game. Their conversation reveals that Bono hasn't been by for a visit in months, that Troy is busy at work driving his truck on different routes every week, that he's now on a route emptying trash for white people, and that Bono's now going to his domino games every Friday night. Bono refuses a drink, and after being teased about how Troy taught him everything he knows about dominoes, he goes out. Troy sits on the steps and sings another verse of the song about Blue.

Cory comes back and tries to step over him to get into the house. Troy angrily insists that Cory say excuse me, saying that he can't stand Cory "stepping over" him. Cory keeps trying to get by, Troy keeps insisting that Cory say excuse me, and Cory says that Troy doesn't count around there any more. Troy loses his temper and says Cory can turn around, walk out the yard, and make his own life. He talks about how much he's given Cory but Cory tells him that all he's ever done is hold him back and make him live in fear because he (Troy) doesn't want his son to be better than him. When Troy shouts at him to get away from his house, Cory says that it's not his house at all, that it was all bought with Gabriel's money. Troy goes towards him to hit him but Cory defends himself with the baseball bat. Rose comes back just as Troy shouts that Cory's had strike three and that he's kicking him out. Rose tells him he can't, but Cory says he needs to go. He tells Rose he'll be back for his things and leaves. Rose protests but Troy tells her he doesn't want to hear what she has to say. Rose goes in the house and Troy shouts hallelujah!

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

This scene illustrates the many ways in which Troy has lost control over the people in his life. Lyons returns some borrowed money, which illustrates how he's breaking free of Troy's conceptions of him as a freeloader. Meanwhile, Bono reveals that he's spending lots of time with other people, while Rose's scene with the cake reveals that she's spending time at the church instead of at home. Both Bono and Rose are clearly influenced less and less by Troy.

Most notably, Cory's confrontation with his father shows how Cory has come to a clear understanding of exactly what role his father has played in his life, has finally had enough, and is physically and emotionally breaking free. His literal "stepping over" Troy becomes a metaphorical stepping over, in that Cory has that he has to live his own life, break free of Troy's controlling pre-conceptions, and step over all the roadblocks that his father, good intentions or bad, has put in front of him. This confrontation, the climactic scene of the play, illustrates again how history has repeated itself - again. Troy is attempting to do to Cory what his father did to him, and therefore dramatizes the thematic statement that a parent's responsibility for his children's well-being goes beyond merely providing them with food, clothing, and shelter.

Cory's reference to the house being built on Gabriel's money illustrates how Troy has built his life on the foundations of other people doing what he tells them to do. This implies that Troy's will for himself, his own dreams and desires, particularly in terms of baseball, have failed to serve him and that that's what's ruined his life, not the white man, not God, and not death.

Troy's shout of hallelujah is an ironic shout of joy at his freedom. He thinks he's free of all his obligations and responsibilities to people who aren't grateful, but what he's actually done is lost what has defined his adult life - the dependence of others.

Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

A young woman comes out of the house. Rose calls her Raynell, and tells her to come back in to put on some shoes. Raynell says she just wants to see how her garden is growing. As she looks, Cory comes in, dressed in a marine sergeant's uniform. Raynell calls for Rose, who comes out and embraces Cory happily. She introduces Raynell to Cory, saying he's her brother. She then tells Raynell to go into the house and get dressed.

Rose and Cory's conversation reveals that Cory's been in the Marines for several years, that he's got a girlfriend, and that he's come for Troy's funeral. Rose tells him that she doesn't know whether Lyons and Gabriel will be coming, and that she's been too busy with her job to see either of them often. Cory comments that the fence got built, and Rose tells him that Troy finally finished it to keep Raynell in when she was young. Their comments reveal that the fence has actually fallen back down to the state it was at when Cory left. Rose then tells Cory that Troy died suddenly, swinging his baseball bat.

Cory tells Rose that he's not coming for the funeral, that it's his way of getting clear from his father completely. Rose tells him that there's no way of ever doing that. She tells a long story of how Troy's huge body and personality filled their home until there was no room for her, how Raynell brought the kind of hope she always wanted into her life, and how Cory can't escape the part of him that was always, and always will be, Troy.

Raynell comes out of the house dressed for the funeral. Rose sends her back in to find her shoes and belt. As she goes, Lyons arrives and embraces Cory. Rose goes back in to fix them all some breakfast. Lyons and Cory talk about what they've each been doing over the last few years, Cory's having been in the Marines and Lyons' having been in jail for cashing other people's checks. He adds that Troy always said you had to take the bad with the good, and then Rose calls out that breakfast is ready. Lyons salutes Cory, goes in, and says hi to Raynell who's on her way out.

Raynell asks Cory whether he knows the song that their papa used to sing about Blue the dog. Cory starts, and they sing the song together. When they're done Rose comes out and tells Raynell to go back into the house. Just then Gabriel arrives, carrying his trumpet and preparing to blow the gates of heaven open for Troy. He starts to blow, but realizes he's not making a sound. He then, as Troy's entire family watches, starts singing and dancing a strange song and dance instead. He finishes, knowing that the gates of heaven are open.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

This scene celebrates both the freedom that Troy's family has found and their reconciliation with what he did to them while he was alive. Cory's freedom, as illustrated

by his pride in his career and insistence upon not staying for the funeral parallels Rose's story of how she found freedom from Troy's influence through loving Raynell, which is ironic given that Raynell was not her real daughter. Rose's story illustrates the thematic point that true freedom and joy come through living with genuine compassion, as Rose did when she was raising Raynell. This is a clear contrast to Troy's way of living, which was based on a philosophy of fear, control, and resentment.

Another contrast to Rose and Cory's sense of freedom is made by Lyons, who seems to have in some way become his father in the same way that Troy became his. He seems to have inherited Troy's capacity for bending the rules, something we saw earlier in Troy's determination to drive without actually having a license, and has also had to endure jail time. On the other hand, Lyons is still sustained by his dreams and ideals of being a musician, whereas Troy's dreams of being a baseball player are a part of what led to his bitterness, which in turn led to his drive for control. The spiritually corrosive nature of Troy's failed dreams is symbolized by the fact that he died while swinging his baseball bat. In other words, baseball killed him, literally and figuratively.

The final moments of the play, in which Gabriel sings and dances the gates of heaven open for Troy's spirit, illuminate the freedom the entire family feels. Gabriel's failed trumpet playing symbolizes the way Troy failed to control him and everyone else, while Gabriel's dancing manifests the way that he, the family, and even Troy are now, finally, truly free.

Bibliography

Wilson, August. "Fences." Plume Publishing. New York. 1986

Characters

Jim Bono

Bono is Troy Maxson's closest friend. They met while in prison and spent fifteen years together locked inside. Troy has been the leader whom Bono has willingly followed. They work together hauling garbage until Troy is promoted to driver That event, combined with Troy's preoccupation with his pregnant mistress, serves to create the first serious discord between the two men in nearly thirty-four years of friendship. Bono is very concerned with Troy's dalliance with another woman and the risk it poses to !us friend's marriage. Jim's wife, Lucille, is never seen on stage, but he speaks of her with obvious affection and admiration; she has tamed his wanderlust. Bono's positive relationship with Lucille demonstrates that a man has the ability to change the direction of his life.

Cory Maxson

Cory is the Maxsons' teenage son. When the play opens he is being actively recruited for a college football scholarship HIS father feels that he is spending too much time at practice and ignoring his other responsibilities. Cory represents all the possibilities his father never had, but he also represents Troy's unmet dreams Troy wants his son to achieve a future that does not include hauling garbage. Yet the father is unwilling to let the son attempt something that may bring him success; Troy is afraid that the world of white-dominated sports will only break Cory's heart.

When Cory quits his job to concentrate on football, his father retaliates by going to the coach and forbidding Cory to play. After a particularly heated confrontation, Cory leaves home. At the play's end, he returns after an absence of seven years for his father's funeral Cory has spent the last SIX years as a Marine, but he is now considering a new direction that includes marriage and a new job. Initially he does not want to attend his father's funeral, the chasm is too wide, and he believes his controlling father never loved him. He eventually realizes that he must put the past behind him, forgive his father, and attend the funeral.

Gabriel Maxson

Gabriel is Troy's brother. Troy has helped care for Gabriel since World War II during which his brother received a debilitating head injury. Gabriel's mental capacity has been diminished by the injury and left him believing that he is the archangel Gabriel. Troy used Gabriel's disability settlement to buy the house in which the family lives, and he continues to receive a part of Gabriel's monthly benefit checks as rent. When the play opens, Gabriel has Just moved into his own lodgings. His life is filled with his singing and his expressed wait for St. Peter to call upon Gabriel to open the gates of heaven.

After bailing Gabriel out of jail several times, Troy finally has him committed to a mental hospital. At the play's end, it is Gabriel who brings some resolution as he calls for the gate of heaven to open and admit Troy. Gabriel attempts to blow a trumpet to herald Troy into heaven, finds that the mouthpiece is broken, and begins a jumping about and how ling as the stage darkens.

Lyons Maxson

Lyons is Troy's thirty-four-year-old son from a previous marriage; he was raised by his mother after Troy was sent to jail, and he has little respect for his father's advice. He does, however, have need of his father's money, frequently arriving at the house on Troy's paydays. Lyons hopes for a career as a musician and is disinterested in any work that would interfere with his goal. Consequently, he is unemployed and is supported by his wife, Bonnie. Lyons knows little about his father, but when he hears that his father has been on his own since he was fourteen, Lyons is finally impressed enough to pay attention as his father speaks.

Raynell Maxson

Raynell is the child Troy fathered with his mistress, Alberta. When Alberta dies giving birth, he brings the three-day old infant home for Rose to raise. She is seven years old when her father dies, but she has come to represent all the family's hopes for a better future. In the final scene, it is Raynell and Cory's singing of their father's favorite song that helps heal the pain of Cory's angry memories of his father.

Rose Maxson

Rose is Troy's wife of eighteen years. She is ten years younger than him and a strong woman who is devoted to her husband. Her devotion ends, however, when Troy tells her of his affair With Alberta and his impending fatherhood. Rose wants the fence built around their house so that she can keep her family safe within its confines. She tries to mediate the conflicts that arise between Troy and his sons. It is Rose who loans money to Lyons, and it is Rose who tries to soften Troy's unconditional control over Cory's life. She is deeply wounded by Troy's affair and although they continue living in the Same house, their loving relationship as husband and wife is over. Rose agrees to raise the child, Raynell, because she does not believe that the child should suffer for the sin of her parents. She substitutes religion for the companionship of marriage, and by the time Raynell is born, Rose has become an active member of her church. It is Rose who calls for family unity and healing at the play's end, she urges all the family members and friends to forgive and remember the good things about Troy.

Troy Maxson

Troy is the principal character. He is fifty-three when the play begins. He has led a hard life, raised by an abusive father and later jailed for robbery and murder During the fifteen years he spent in jail, Troy became an accomplished baseball player. But after his release from jail Troy was too old to play in the newly-integrated major leagues. He is bitter and resentful at the opportunities lost because of the color of his skin and is desperate to protect Cory from the same sort of disappointment. Troy lives in the past and fails to recognize that the world has changed His father was brutal and controlling, and although Troy loves Cory, he knows of no other way to bring up a son. Thus he repeats the mistakes of the previous generation.

Troy feels a need to control every element of his life and even declares that he will fight death if necessary. His affair with Alberta represents his attempt to escape the responsibility he feels for wife, son, and home. Unable to open up to those that he loves, Troy keeps much of his emotion inside, building imaginary fences between himself and his family and friends. While he realizes the financial responsibility of being the head of a family, he fails to grasp the emotional part of the job. Troy finally succeeds in isolating himself from his wife, his brother, his sons, and his friend.

Themes

Death

In *Fences,* death is a character. Rather than the elusive unknown, death becomes an object that Troy attempts to battle. The unfinished fence that Troy is building around his home is completed only when Troy feels threatened by death. In one of the stories he tells, Troy relates how he once wrestled with death and won. When the simmering conflict between Troy and Cory finally erupts and the boy leaves his father's house for good, it is death that Troy calls upon to do battle. And in the last scene, it is death that unites the family and helps bring resolution to their lives. When the family meets again at Troy's funeral, they are finally given a chance to bury the pain and disappointments of their lives.

Duty and Responsibility

Troy Maxson is a man who assumes the responsibilities of father, husband, and provider. In addition, he looks after his disabled brother, Gabriel. Though he faces these responsibilities, he is also overwhelmed by them, seeking escape when it is offered to him. When It is revealed that Alberta, the other woman that Troy has been seeing, is pregnant, Troy responds that he is not ducking the responsibility of what he has done. He accepts the obligation he owes to both his wife and his mistress.

When Rose asks why Troy needed another woman, his reply is that Alberta was an escape from his responsibilities. She did not have a roof that needed fixing; her house was a place where he could forget that he was someone's husband, someone's father, someone's employee. Troy feels the weight of responsibility so heavily that he can see only endless weeks of labor, endless paychecks to be cashed, endless Fridays blending into one another.

When Alberta dies giving birth, Troy assumes responsibility for the infant and brings her to his home. In turn, Rose agrees to raise and care for the child. In the end it is the responsibility each member of the family feels toward the others that brings resolution to the story.

Fences

Fences represent many different things in Wilson's drama. Rose thinks the partially built fence around the house will keep her loved ones safe inside. But for Troy, the fence is a way to keep unwanted intruders out. After Alberta's death, he completes the fence as a means to keep death from entering and hurting his loved ones. When Troy played baseball, he was never content to hit the ball into the stands. His hits always had to go over the fence. And yet, Troy builds a fence around Cory to keep him from his goals and desires. Troy's efforts at controlling his son create an imaginary fence that keeps the

boy separate from his family for seven years. There are similar fences between Troy and his loved ones; in one way or another he has kept them separated from a part of himself.

When Troy tells his life story, it is a tale of penitentiary walls behind which he was a prisoner for fifteen years Bono was also confined within these walls. By Act II, the walls of a mental hospital will separate Gabriel from his family. Troy also sees white America having a fence that keeps blacks contained, apart from the good life that whites enjoy. It is the fence that kept him from realizing his dreams and the fence that makes blacks garbage collectors while whites advance to better positions such as driver

In the sense of physical setting, the fence around Troy's house also contains the action of the play Everything takes place in the yard; all of the scenes and the dialogue occur Within the boundaries of the fence.

Friendship

The friendship between Troy and Bono is the first relationship shown in the play Their conversations provide a glimpse into Troy's thoughts Bono has been following Troy's lead since they met in prison more than thirty years earlier. Troy has been a role model for Bono, but Bono serves as a conscience for Troy. It is Bono who first alerts the audience to Troy's extramarital affair, and It is Bono who questions the wisdom of Troy's actions. The friendship is tested when Troy is promoted to driver and put on another route When questioned about his absence from Troy's house, Bono replies that It is the new job that keeps them apart. But there is also a hint that Troy's betrayal of Rose has changed the dynamics of their friendship.

Limitations and Opportunities

At the heart of Troy's unhappiness is his disappointment at not being able to play professional baseball. Troy became an accomplished ball player while in prison. He was good enough to play in the Negro leagues, but his true desire was to play major league ball. Troy felt he was excluded because, at the time, black players were still not accepted, but the story is more complex than Troy wants to believe. The fifteen years that Troy spent in prison made him too old for the major leagues. Troy ignores this argument, since to acknowledge that he was too old is to accept partial responsibility for not being able to play; it was his own actions that led to a fifteen-year prison term, a period during which his youth slipped away. It is easier for Troy to blame a system that discriminates against black players than to admit that he lacked either the talent or the youth to play major league baseball.

Troy's son, Cory, also has the opportunity for a better life through athletics. But Troy is so bitter over his own lack of opportunity that he holds his son back from any success he might achieve. When Cory is recruited for a college football scholarship, it is his father who forbids Cory to play. Troy is unable to accept that his son might succeed where he had failed-and Cory accuses his father of just such a motivation. But It is more

than a desire to control Cory's success that is at the heart of Troy's actions. He truly fails to see that the world has changed in the past twenty years. Black men are now playing professional sports with white men. The restrictions that kept the two races apart athletically have eased. A football scholarship would mean more than playing a sport; it would be an opportunity for education and a chance to advance to a better world.

Race and Racism

In a story that Troy tells in the play, the devil is represented as a white business owner who takes advantage of his black customers. The setting for *Fences* is just before the racial tensions of the 1960s erupt. Troy is a garbage man. He has noticed that only white men are promoted to driver, and, although he possesses no driver's license, Troy complains about the injustice of a system that favors one race while excluding another. Because he has complained, Troy is promoted, but the result is that he no longer works with his friends and the camaraderie of the workplace is lost. Troy also feels that his dream to play professional baseball was destroyed because he was a black player in a white world. Because he has spent a lifetime being excluded, Troy cannot see any advantage for his son when college recruiters come to watch Cory play football. Troy cannot trust the white man, the devil, and so, he forbids his son to play football.

Style

Act

A major division in a drama. In Greek plays the sections of the drama signified by the appearance of the chorus and were usually divided into five acts. This is the formula for most serious drama from the Greeks to the Romans to Elizabethan playwrights like William Shakespeare The five acts denote the structure of dramatic action. They are exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. The five act structure was followed until the nineteenth century when Henrik Ibsen *(A Doll's House)* combined some of the acts. *Fences* is a two-act play. The exposition and complication are combined in the first act when the audience learns of Troy's affair with another woman and of the conflict between father and son, the role sports plays in each man's life. The climax occurs in the second act when Troy must admit to having fathered a child with his mistress. The climax to the father-son friction also occurs in the second act when the conflict between Troy and Cory escalates, and Cory leaves his father's home for good. The catastrophe also occurs when the players assemble for Troy's funeral and Cory is finally able to deal with his resentment and accept his father's failings.

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for *Fences* is an urban city in 1957 America. The action occurs over a period of several months and then jumps ahead seven years for the last scene The action is further reduced to one set, the yard of the Maxson home.

Character

A person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multi-faceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. , 'Characterization" is the process of creating a lifelike person *from* an author's imagination. To accomplish this, the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation. For instance, in the beginning of *Fences* Troy seems to accept the responsibilities he has acquired He appears content with his marriage and comfortable in providing for his family and caring for Gabriel. As the action progresses, however, it becomes clear that Troy yearns for escape from these responsibilities. He finds his escape with Alberta but at the cost of his marriage.

Conflict

The conflict is the issue(s) to be resolved in the play. It usually occurs between two characters, but it can also occur between a character and society (as It does in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible).* Conflict serves to create tension in a plot-it is often the motivating force that drive a plot. For instance, in *Fences* there is a clear conflict between Cory's desire to play footfall and the disappointments that his father felt when his dreams of success in professional sports were never realized. There is also conflict between Troy and his wife when she discovers that he has fathered a child with another woman. And finally, Troy's disappointment in sports represents the conflict between a largely white dominated organization, professional sports, and a talented black man who feels he has been cheated and deprived of success. This conflict provides one of the fences that isolates black athletes *from* opportunities available to white Americans.

Metaphor

Metaphor is an analogy that Identifies one object with another and ascribes to the first object the qualities of the second. For example, the fence is a metaphor for the walls that confine Troy and Bono to prison. There are fences (though unseen) between Troy and his family. It is also a metaphor for the white society that confines blacks and restricts their opportunities in this drama, baseball is also a metaphor for Troy's life. His successes are hits over the fence, but his failures are strike-outs.

Plot

This term refers to the pattern of events. Generally plots should have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also be a series of episodes connected together. Basically, the plot provides the author with the-means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused between the two terms; but themes explore ideas, and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner. Thus the plot of *Fences* is the story of a black family divided by the loss and anger of past and present disappointments. But the themes are those of family unity and love and racial intolerance.

Historical Context

Professional Athletics

By 1957, the year in which *Fences* is set, black athletes had become an integrated part of professional and college sports, at least on the surface. The all-white teams of the World War II-and previous-years began to include blacks in 1947 when Jackie Robinson became the first black to play professional baseball since the color line was drawn in the 1890s. But the change still did not bring the same opportunity and equality as blacks might have hoped. Black leagues began to falter and disappear as more blacks began to support the now integrated ball teams Troy Maxson, who had played in the Negro Leagues, found the change to integrated leagues had come too late; he was now too old to play professional ball.

The Negro Leagues had been financial disasters for players; salaries were inadequate to support a family. But, ten years after integration, the major leagues did not prove to be a financial bonanza for black players either. The huge salaries that were to become the hallmark of professional sports in the 1980s and 1990s simply did not exist in the late 1950s. The picture for college athletics was also different for blacks than for whites. Black players were not always permitted to live in campus housing, and when they traveled to games, black athletes were sometimes refused accommodations at hotels where the team was staying. Instead, black players were dropped off at the YMCA or lodged with black families. Given this knowledge, it is little wonder that Troy is suspicious of the recruiters who want to seduce his son with college scholarships and the possibility of a career in professional sports.

Employment

When the flood of immigrants poured into the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, they found opportunity and employment in factories, offices, and small business. The white work force was plentiful and employers took advantage of the availability of the eager new citizens, who came expecting that hard work would make it possible to marry, raise a family, and live the American Dream. But for blacks, who were also moving into large northern cities in huge numbers, the American Dream remained an elusive possibility, just beyond their grasp.

Troy admits that had he not been able to use his brother's disability benefit, he would not have been able to purchase a home, even though he had been working hard for nearly twenty years. With the availability of a large white work force, blacks were too often the last hired and the first fired. In addition, many black workers lacked the training necessary to get ahead. The job of hauling garbage is available to blacks, but even within that job, there is a division of work by race. White employees drive trucks; black employees load the garbage. Troy cannot read and does not have a driver's license, but he breaks through the color barrier to win a driver's job because he complains that there

are no black drivers The Union, which protects his job when he complains, is the one ally the black workers have.

Housing

Because of limited job opportunities, most blacks did not earn enough money to own their own homes. But in 1957 the American Dream became a reality for many white families. In the post-war economy, home ownership for whites was booming. The World War II GJ. Bill had made it possible for returning servicemen to go to college. These better educated men found successful careers that brought a higher standard of living than the previous generation had known. This resulted in an explosion of new home building, the creation of suburbs, and ultimately, the exodus of whites from the inner city. Few blacks could afford the new homes that were going up on development sites all across the country. Instead, many urban blacks lived in the same kind of ghetto in which Wilson himself had been born. The front yard of the Maxson home is a rarity for most black families who often lived in huge inner-city apartment buildings.

Racism

The 1950s still revealed an America with two races, separated by color and economic barriers. Blacks and whites attended different schools, lived in different neighborhoods, and received different benefits from their citizenship. Before the advent of forced busing in the 1960s, most blacks attended schools in poorer neighborhoods. Because schools are funded by a complicated system of bonds supported by taxes, black schools (in neighborhoods that collected lower taxes) received less money and thus had smaller resources with which to pay salaries, maintain buildings, or buy new equipment. The result was that students at predomi nately black schools received a sub-standard level of education.

Other areas of inequality included suffrage and justice. Blacks were Dot encouraged to vote; in fact, many areas discouraged blacks from voting by instituting difficult competency exams as qualifiers. Whites were not required to pass these exams. Accordingly, blacks had little input into the political decisions that shaped their lives. Blacks also suffered unequal treatment under the law. Many could not read the contracts they signed or were too intimidated to protest. In addition, blacks often became the victims of discrimination under criminal statutes. Ignorance of their legal rights meant that blacks often languished in jail. In some cases, blacks were lynched by unruly mobs who were sometimes sanctioned by a law enforcement organization that looked the other way. The civil unrest of the 1960s was a direct result of these injustices.

Critical Overview

When *Fences* first opened on Broadway in March of 1987, Wilson had already spent four years in pre-production revisions to his play. James Earl Jones, who won a Tony Award for his performance in the Broadway production, had first played Troy Maxson in the Yale Repertory Theatre production two years earlier. His ease and interpretation of an already familiar character were evident to reviewers who hailed Jones's performance. Allan Wallach, in his *Newsday* review, said that Jones gave this role "its full measure of earthiness and complexity." Jones, said Wallach, was at his best when Troy is drinking and laughing with his friends; his "performance is at its heartiest in the bouts of drinking and bantering." Wallach also singled out Wilson's ability to capture the "rhythms of his characters" who gather in the yard of the Maxson home, a yard that "becomes a rich portrait of a man who scaled down his dreams to fit inside his run-down yard." Wallach's review is an acknowledgment of Wilson's strength in "depicting a black man forced to come to terms with an unfeeling white world." However, Wallach also found that the scenes where Troy interacts with his family sometimes fell to conventional family fare.

Reviewer Clive Barnes offered no such distinction in his review that appeared in the *New York Post.* Barnes called *Fences* a play that "seems to break away from the confines of art into a dense, complex realization of reality. " *Fences* is a play that makes the audience forget it is in a theater, thinking instead that they are witnessing a real family drama. Barnes also singled out Jones for praise in a role that left the reviewer "transfixed." But Wilson was also praised for writing drama "so engrossing, so embracing, so simply powerful" that he transcended an effort to label him a black playwright. Instead, Wilson's ability to tell a story makes such labels, in Barnes's opinion, "irrelevant. " Barnes also praised the play for its historic relevance and cited the lessons Troy learned while in prison and his experience playing baseball. Barnes declared that Wilson has created "the strongest, most passionate American dramatic writing since Tennessee Williams." Barnes's review contained no reservations. He praised the actors, noting that Jones's performance was not the only excellent one of the production and offered equal approval for the staging and setting. The sum total of these elements resulted in what Barnes described as "one of the richest experiences I have ever had in the theatre."

Edwin Wilson's praise of *Fences* was just as full of compliments as that of Barnes and Wallach. In his *Wall Street Journal* review, Wilson stated that with *Fences,* the author had demonstrated that he can "strike at the heart, not just of the black experience, but of the human condition." Troy is a character who is multi-dimensional; his complexity reveals a man "with the full measure of his shortcomings as well as his strengths" The audience witnesses the characters' depth of ambition, their frustration, and their pain, according to this reviewer. As did other reviewers, Wilson also noted the exceptional quality of the setting and the staging. *Fences,* said Wilson, is " 'an especially welcome and important addition to the season"

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Metzger is a professional writer with a specialty in drama. In this essay she discusses Wilson's metaphoric use of baseball in portraying the life of his lead character, Troy Maxson.

The most prevalent Image in August Wilson's *Fences* is baseball. It is the sport that defines Troy Maxson's life and provides the measure of his success. Indeed, Wilson has constructed the play into nine scenes-or innings-to emphasize the connection. According to Christine Birdwell in *Aethlon,* the innings correspond to the seasons of Troy's life. In some innings. Troy is the hero who wins for his team, his family. These are the innings defined by Troy's success: his early success as a great hitter for the Negro Leagues, his protest at work that wins him a promotion to driver, and his noble, responsible efforts to provide for his family. But some innings are losses for Troy (and his team): his misunderstandings and painful confrontations with his two sons, his institutionalizing of his brother Gabriel, his broken relationships with Rose and Bono, and the death of Alberta. In the ninth inning, when Troy is dead, his family gathers in the yard to remember Troy's wins and losses.

Birdwell noted that Wilson does not provide much information about the black baseball leagues in his play. The role baseball plays in framing Troy's strengths and weaknesses is more important than the history of the game itself. Instead the emphasis is on characterization. The audience learns that Troy was a good hitter and that his home run average far exceeded those of many white players. Nevertheless, the Negro League was not a source of viable income for its players; Troy could not have bought his home without the additional money from Gabriel's disability checks In one of his complaints about the color line in baseball, Troy observes that he "saw Josh GIbson's daughter yesterday. She was walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet." He then compares Gibson's child to the child of a white major league player, and declares "I bet you Selkirk's daughter ain't walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet." The reference is clear: Negro League players cannot make enough money to support their families The injustice rankles Troy whose bitterness at the slight baseball has shown him is evident throughout the play.

Besides his thirty-year friendship with Bono, the fifteen years that he spent in prison provided Troy with another benefit It demonstrated to him that he had a talent, one that set him apart from other men, one that proved his worth. But, as Birdwell noted, baseball also proved a disappointment For Troy, "the triumphs of the past have become bitter betrayals, and baseball now means lost dreams. Baseball had defined Troy, had given him meaning and status; now It has left him with nothing tangible."

Troy is so angry over his own lost opportunities that, by 1957, he cannot take pleasure in the fact that black men are finally able to play major league ball. Integration means nothing to him because it came too late to benefit *his* life. He complains that "If you could play ball then they ought to have let you play." Ability and not color should determine who plays baseball, but Troy recognizes that Justice has been missing for

black men. When he tries to explain his distrust of the white sport establishment to Cory, Troy observes that "the colored guy got to be twice as good [as the white player] before he get on the team." He also notes that although the leagues are now integrated, the black players sit on the bench and are not used. Cory has no personal experience that corresponds to his father's. He has been playing football in high school and recruiters want him to play in college; he fails to see any lack of opportunity. Each man feels the other is blind to the truth, but both are centered in their own experience.

In a real sense, Troy has become blind to the changes of the past ten years, and it is this ignorance that provokes him to deny Cory's chance at succeeding. Too often, fathers use sons to achieve the success they feel they have been denied. But Troy has no desire to live vicariously through his son. Finally, in the eighth inning/scene, their opposing positions result in a confrontation that turns violent. After having been told by his father that he is earning strikes, Cory grabs a baseball bat and advances with the intent of swinging at his father. This is the strike-out about which Troy has been warning his son. Cory swings twice and misses, but Troy is stronger and seizes the bat, denying his son the third swing that may have resulted in a strike-out or a hit.

Birdwell observed that in this scene, "Wilson presents a reverse image of the traditional, treasured father-and-son backyard game depicted in films and on television. Instead father and son vie for the bat transformed into a weapon, and savage combat erupts." Baseball should provide fathers and sons with a bonding experience, with an opportunity for playful competition. But Cory cannot compete with Troy. Troy's need for control, a pattern he learned from his own brutal father, is too ingrained for him to soften his ways. Although he means the best for Cory, Troy's misdirected efforts result in the loss of his son. He will die without having ever seen Cory again.

The relationship that Troy forges with his wife, Rose, also proves to be limited by his experience in baseball. After eighteen years of marriage, Troy feels he needs to escape the confining walls of responsibility through an affair with another woman. The other woman, Alberta, is Troy's attempt to capture what has been lost, his youth. If Troy is now too old to play major league baseball, he is not too old to be attractive to other women. Birdwell insisted that Alberta "returns Troy to baseball's yesteryears, in which, according to Bono, 'a lot of them old gals was after [him],' when he 'had the pick of the litter.'"

While Troy might see another woman as a way to escape into the past, there is less opportunity for Rose to escape the pressures and responsibilities of life. The role women play in *Fences* is limited by the time period in which the play is set. In the 1950s, women were restrained by traditional roles and the division of private and public spheres. Men functioned in the public sphere; they left the home to go to jobs. In contrast, women primarily functioned in the private sphere of home and domestic chores

When Rose is confronted with Troy's infidelity, she may choose to remain in the marriage, but that choice does not signify that she is accepting or helpless. During her

marriage, Rose has allowed Troy to fill her life. She tells Troy, "I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams. . . and I buried them inside you."

But Troy's betrayal forces Rose to reassess her position, according to Harry Elam in *May All Your Fences Have Gates.* This reassessment, noted Elam, means new avenues of freedom that "affirm rather than assault traditional gender limitations." Rose substitutes her church for her husband. When, at the end of the seventh inning/scene, Rose tells Troy that "this child got a mother. But you a womanless man," she is asserting her independence from her husband. Elam quoted Patricia Collins's argument that black women learn independence at church, but they also learn to subordinate their interests to the greater good of the African American community.

Rose has chosen to take the subservient role in marriage. She admits her complicity, but the audience is reminded that her options were few. Yet she is not an oppressed woman, and when Rose takes the infant Raynell and speaks the lines that end this scene, Elam noted that "the audience, particularly black female spectators, erupted with cheers and applause" Clearly, Rose is perceived by black women as a strong female character and not an oppressed figure. As Sandra Shannon noted in an essay in *May All Your Fences Have Gates,* Rose "evolves from a long-suffering heroine to a fiercely independent woman." This evolution is what audiences are cheering.

With *Fences,* Wilson created a play that explores the barriers that confine blacks. The title serves as a metaphor for all the fences that imprison the Maxsons. The fence that surrounds the Maxson home is not the white picket fence of the 1950s American ideal. Their fence is not decor and it is not an enhancement-its purpose is strictly utilitarian. At the beginning of the play, Troy thinks he is building a fence to please Rose. She wants a fence that will keep all those she loves safe inside its walls. Later, after Alberta's death, Troy completes the fence to keep danger, death, outside its walls.

For most of the play's action, though, Troy is in no hurry to complete Rose's fence, after all, he has spent time in prison with fences limiting his movements. And when he played baseball, he was never content to just hit a home run into the stands; he felt that he had to transcend the boundaries of the stadium and hit a ball over the fence For Troy, fences have been a restriction, and he's in no hurry to build another. Yet there are many fences that he in Troy's way that he cannot control or rut a ball over. The mental hospital where Troy confines Gabriel provides one such fence, while another kind of fence-one between the living and the dead-is erected when Alberta dies It is this latter enclosure that finally creates a sense of urgency in Troy.

The fence Troy completes, however, will fail to keep Cory inside. Although Troy has attempted to confine Cory within his authority, his son does escape. Yet when he returns, the audience learns that Cory is now bound within the confines of a far more strict institution, the military. Cory has escaped from his father's authority only to end up bound in the rule of the Marine Corps. With the Vietnam War looming only a few years away, the boundary created by the military is an especially dangerous one for black males.

The fences that would keep Cory from reaching his goals is not unlike the fences that limit Rose. In the last scenes of the play when Rose finally asserts herself, she is really only exchanging Troy's fence for the one offered by the church. Religion provides its own fences and limitations, and for Rose, who chooses not to break free of the institution of marriage, the church offers a haven within its institutionalized walls. Even Gabriel who is allowed a temporary escape from the mental hospital, ends the play with an effort to create an opening in the fence so that Troy might enter heaven. But for blacks, the most difficult fence to scale, the one that restricts their achievements, the one that steals opportunities, is the fence that whites erect to keep blacks in a place away from mainstream success. This is the fence that Wilson wants his audience to see. This is the fence against which blacks are forced to struggle.

In an interview that appeared in *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights,* Wilson said that by the end of *Fences,* every character had been institutionalized, except Raynell; she is the hope of the future. Raynell stands within the confines of the fence that surrounds the yard, but the audience leaves with the perception that she will go beyond that barrier to achieve a better future than her father.

Source: Sheri Metzger for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In this review, Hornby gives a positive appraisal of Wilson 's work, deeming both the text and the production to be exemplary.

August Wilson's *Fences* deals with a black family living in "a North American industrial city" in the late 1950s. The father, Troy Maxson, is a former star baseball player of the Negro leagues who was too old to get into the majors when they at last opened up to blacks after World War II. He resents the false promise that sports held for him, and blocks his own son's promising career as a football player.

Troy's life has been filled with disappointment, oppression, and just plain bad luck: Raised in the South in billet poverty, he today cannot even read. As a youth, he served time in the penitentiary as result of a stabbing in a robbery he committed simply to get food. His brother received a head injury in the war that reduced him to a mental child, with only Troy to care for him. Troy holds down a job as a garbage collector, prevented by the color of his skin from getting promoted to driver. All these problems are "fences" that have held him in all his life.

Nevertheless, this is not a bitter play, but a warm and often comic view of black life in America. Troy has a wonderful, loving wife, and a strong friendship with his longtime co-worker, Jim Bono

Troy's relationships with his son, with another son by a previous marriage, and with his retarded brother Gabriel, are not always harmonious, but are always based on deep and genuine feeling.

All the action of the play, in nine scenes spread over eight years, takes place in the Maxsons' back yard. Many of the scenes appear on the surface to be mere slices of life, with nothing much happening, yet, like Chekhov, Wilson always keeps the plot subtly moving forward. Troy jokes and tells stories, rails against the ballplayers of the day- Jackie Robinson is just lucky, there were black teams he could not even have made in the old days I-banters with his wife, argues with his sons and brother, and procrastinates over repairing the back fence, the visible manifestation of the symbol that unifies the play. As with Chekhov, major events take place offstage: we hear how Troy eventually gets a promotion by going to his union, and how he drifts into an affair with a young woman (never seen) that nearly wrecks his marriage, and leaves him and his wife with another child to raise when the woman dies in childbirth.

The rift between Troy and his son widens; blocked from going to college on a football scholarship, and disgusted with his father's infidelity, the boy confronts Troy in the only overtly physical scene in the play. In this classic father-son *agon,* each has an opportunity to kill the other, but draws back. Tragedy averted, the son goes off to join the Marines, returning only for his father's funeral years later, confronting the many fences that have figured in their lives- "fences to keep people out, and fences to keep people in."

James Earl Jones was superb in the lead role. He still has the physical strength and agility he had twenty years ago in *The Great White Hope,* and although, like the character he played in *Fences,* he shows his age, he also convinced you of his underlying athletic ability, which is so important to the role. When Troy insisted that he "can hit forty-three home runs right now!", Jones made you believe it. He also skillfully used his well-known, resonant voice with wide variations and contrasts, giving a rich, musical quality to the many stories-the play is full of long, set speeches-which were also enhanced by his ability for both physical and vocal mimicry, as he imitated the many real and imaginary characters he described. Jones is a wonderfully *precise* actor; the performance was full of telling detail, such as the way he would swig at a bottle of gin he was sharing with his friends, managing a big, fast swallow while fastidiously keeping the bottle from touching his lips. The role won him a Tony Award for the best performance of the year on Broadway, and one should add that he was lucky, these days, to have a role worthy of his talents to perform there.

Jones was supported by an excellent cast, especially Mary Alice, who brought ease, charm, and poignancy to the role of his wife, and Frankie R. Faison, who turned the tricky role of the retarded brother-which could easily have degenerated into something sentimental or, on the other hand, disgustingly clinical-into a performance that was deft and lyrical. Lloyd Richards directed with his usual skill and clarity, while James D. Sandefur designed the naturalistic yet evocative setting. The only flaw here was that, perhaps because it was in the inappropriate 46th Street Theatre, sightlines required the setting to be placed far downstage, which limited much of the blocking to one dimension.

Fences won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, which It well deserved Some of its excellence, however, derives from its being part of a whole school of contemporary black playwriting, by authors such as Lonne Elder III, Charles H. Fuller, Jr., and Leslie Lee. Many of their plays are better than anything written by fashionable white playwrights like Sam Shepard, David Mamet, or David Rabe, yet they have received less attention and are less likely to appear in anthologies or college courses in contemporary American drama. Influenced by Ibsen and Chekhov, they realistically depict life in black America with understatement, humor, and sadness. They also show the influence of jazz, especially the blues, whose lyrics combine comedy and pathos in giving voice to the problems of ordinary black people. The intense personal relationships that are the glory of black life are made vivid for all of us.

Source: Richard Hornby, review of *Fences* in the *Hudson Review,* Volume XL, no. 3, Autumn, 1987, pp. 470-72.

Critical Essay #3

Weales reviews Fences, *commenting on the advances that Wilson has made since his previous play* Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. *Weales offers a positive review of the play.*

At the end of August Wilson's *Fences,* the Maxsons gather for the funeral of Troy, who has dominated the family and the play. His "mixed-up" brother Gabe, who had "half his head blown away" in World War II and who believes that he has been to heaven, unlimbers the trumpet he always carries "to tell St. Peter to open the gates." There is no mouthpiece, no trumpet blast. After three increasingly desperate tries, Gabe howls in anguish and frustration. Light pours across the scene. "That's the way that go!" he says, smiling his satisfaction.

That's not really the way that go, meaning the playas a whole, but the effectiveness of the final scene is a reminder that Wilson stretches the limits of the realistic form his play takes (as he mixed songs and dramatic scenes in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom)* and that the verisimilitude of his language cannot disguise the lyric qualities in his work. For the most part, *Fences* is a family play in an old American *tradition-Awake and Sing!, Death of a Salesman, A Raisin* in *the Sun-in* which the conflicts within the family are given definition by the social forces outside. Set in "a Northern American industrial City" (i.e., Wilson's Pittsburgh) in 1957, it uses the metaphor of the fence which Troy builds around his backyard as title to a play about the fences between husband and wife, father and son, black and white.

Troy Maxson is a black man in his early fifties, at once an authority figure and a garrulous, playful nice guy. James Earl Jones, in one of his best roles, joins the playwright in making Troy both attractive and threatening. Although he has the strength to buck the system, to get himself promoted from garbage man to driver, he sees the world in terms of his own past. He has become a variation on the tyrant father he ran away to escape He has come to believe that a black man's only choice is between jail, where he spent some youthful years, and a steady job; he cannot see that there might be other possibilities in the 1950s, roads that were not open thirty years earlier.

A central prop in *Fences* is the baseball that hangs on a rope from the tree in the yard. Troy's device for batting practice, it is a constant reminder for him and for us of his greatest triumph and his greatest disappointment Having learned to play baseball in prison, he went on to become a star in the Negro League but, despite his talent, the color line kept bun out of the majors. Whether out of jealousy or to protect the young man, Troy refuses to sign the papers that would let his son go to college on a football scholarship, a destructive act that leads to a final confrontation between the two and a reenactment of the father-son conflict that sent Troy off on his own. He uses his sense of ownership and control (my house, my yard) not only to stifle his son's ambitions but to misuse his brother, whose disability payments bought the house, and his wife, whom he loves but to whom he brings the child of another woman. Sitting in the audience, one could sense who was on what side of which fence by the applause that accompanied the son's defiance and the wife's revolt, her acceptance of the child and rejection of Troy

as husband. Troy fills the last scene even in his absence, and when his son, now a sergeant in the Marines, joins his half-sister in singing Troy's song about Blue that "good old dog," acceptance of and forgiveness for what Troy and his world had made of him prepare the way for Gabe's bringing the light. What remains is Troy's strength, his sense of duty, and his odd vulnerability. "That's the way that go!"

Source: Gerald Weales, review of *Fences* in the *Commonweal,* Volume CXIV, no 10, May 22, 1987, pp 320-21.

Topics for Further Study

What is the nature of the conflict between Cory and Troy? Research the options for black athletes who were recruited by colleges in the 1950s Do you find that Troy's reservations about Cory's future as a ballplayer have merit?

Troy cannot read and so the oral tradition is an important means of communication for him. He tells his life story in Act I, scene iv. But he also tells part of his story through song. Research the role of storytelling as a part of the black experience. Consider also how the oral tradition has been replaced in many cultures by the printed page. Do you think that the oral tradition is a disappearing part of the American cultural experience?

In *Fences,* Troy's description of the devil eventually evolves into a description of a white salesman who cheats his black customers because they are too afraid to question his pronouncements, and thus, they allow themselves to be cheated. Examine the commercial relationship between whites and blacks in the 1950s. Is Troy's cynicism justified by the facts?

Early in Wilson's play, music and athletics are singled out the best opportunities for young black men to escape the ghetto existence of black urban life. Later, Cory joins the Marines, but is this an escape? In 1964, the United States is beginning a build-up of military strength in Vietnam, it will evolve into a war that will eventually be lost. What exactly did the military offer young black men? Research the role of the black soldier in Vietnam and consider if the percentage of blacks who died in that war represented an unequal sacrifice of life.

Compare and Contrast

1957: Ku Klux Klansmen accuse Alabama grocery-chain truck driver Willie Edwards, 25, of having made remarks to a white woman and force him at pistol point to jump to his death from the Tyler Goodwin Bridge into the Alabama River. It was Edwards's first day on the truck route.

1985: Philadelphia police try to dislodge members of MOVE, an organization of armed blacks They firebomb a house from the air on May 13 and the fire spreads to adjacent houses, killing 11 and leaving 200 homeless.

Today: A black woman, previously on public assistance, organizes a million woman rally in Philadelphia. This variant on the 1996 million-man march on Washington D.C. draws more than one million black women in a show of strength and solidarity.

1957: The Motown Corporation is founded in Detroit, Michigan, by entrepreneur Barry Gordy Jr, 30, who invests $700 to start a recording company whose "Motown Sound" will figure large in popular music for more than two decades.

1985: *The Color Purple,* a film based on Alice Walker's novel, is a top grossing box office success for star Whoopi Goldberg and director Steven Spielberg.

Today: *Rosewood,* a film based on actual events that occurred in 1927, examines the massacre that destroyed a small Florida town after a white woman falsely accuses a black man of sexual assault.

1957: Ghana becomes the first African state south of the Sahara to attain independence.

1985: South Africa declares a state of emergency July 20, giving police and the army almost absolute power in Black townships. The country's policy of apartheid has kept blacks as second-class citizens for decades.

Today: For the first time, South Africa is ruled by the racial majority (blacks) led by Nelson Mandela, who languished in white-run prisons during the last 27 years of apartheid rule.

1957: The first U.S. civil rights bill Since Civil War reconstruction days, passed by Congress September 9, establishes a Civil Rights Commission and provides federal safeguards for voting rights. Many Southerners oppose the bill.

1985: The Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act signed by President Reagan mandates congressional spending limits in an effort to eliminate the federal deficit.

Today: Welfare reform results in a loss of services, including food stamps, public assistance, and medical care for many of the nation's poorest citizens. The reform is intended by politicians to be a mechanism that will force welfare recipients into the job

force. But the change is seen by the many organizations that assist the poor as a misdirected effort that will punish the nation's already disadvantaged children.

What Do I Read Next?

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969) offers an autobiographical look at the American black experience. This book provides a feminine perspective of the effects of racism.

The Wedding Band (1966), a play by Alice Childress, examines racism and intolerance through the eyes of a couple who are trying to find acceptance for their interracial love affair. Because the subject was so controversial, the play was not produced until several years after it was written.

A Raisin in the Sun (1959) by Lorraine Hansberry also explores segregation, racism, and the lack of economic opportunities that beset African Americans. The integration of white neighborhoods by minority families is still an important issue nearly forty years after this play was first produced.

The Color Purple (1982) by Alice Walker is a fictional look at the effects of segregation and racism both within black culture and between blacks and whites. The novel (and Steven Spielberg's later movie adaptation) celebrate the strength of black women.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) examines what It means to grow up black and female in America. Morrison explores how white standards of beauty affect young black girls, and she looks at the nature of the relationship between black and white women.

The Piano Lesson, another play by August Wilson, was first performed in 1987. This play probes the conflicts between traditional values and the need to change to better survive the future.

Further Study

Chalk, Ocama. *Pioneers in Black Sport,* Dodd, Mead (New York), 1975.

Chalk provides a detailed discussion of the complicated issue of integration in professional sports.

Elam, Harry J. "August Wilson's Women" in *May All Your Fences Have Gates,* University of Iowa Press, 1994.

Elam is a Professor of Drama at Stanford University. This essay is an examination of the role of women in Wilson's dramas.

Elkins, Marilyn *August Wilson: A Casebook,* Garland (New York), 1994.

This narrow volume is a collection of essays that discuss Wilson's work within the context of historical and cultural influences.

Holway, John. *Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues,* Dodd, Mead, 1975.

This is a scholarly investigation of the Negro Leagues based on player interviews and an examination of sports reportage.

In Their Own Words. Contemporary American Playwrights, Theatre Communications Group, 1988.

This essay is the transcript of a March 1987 interview with Wilson in which he discusses several of his plays.

Nadel, Alan *Essays on the Drama of August Wilson,* University of Iowa Press (Iowa City), 1994.

This is a collection of essays on Wilson's dramatic work. There is also a comprehensive bibliography included.

Paige, Leroy "Satche1." *Maybe I'll Pitch Forever,* Doubleday, l 962.

Perhaps the best-known player from the Negro baseball leagues, Satchel Paige *is* considered to be one of the finest players to engage the game of baseball. This book is an autobiographical look at his career in the Negro Leagues.

Rogosin, Donn. *Invisible Men. Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues,* Atheneum (New York), l983.

This book offers an overview of the social issues that led to the end of the great Negro Leagues.

Ruck, Rob *Sandlot Seasons. Sport* in *Black Pittsburgh,* University of Illinois Press (Urbana), l987.

This nonfiction text probes the history of sports in Pittsburgh, the city of Wilson's youth and the model for the urban setting of *Fences.*

Shannon, Sandra G. "The Ground on Which I Stand" *in May All Your Fences Have Gates,* University of Iowa Press, 1994.

Shannon *is* an Associate Professor of English at Howard University Her essay examines the role of African American women in Wilson's dramas.

Bibliography

Barnes, Clive. "Fiery 'Fences'" in the *New York Post,* March 27, 1987.

Birdwell, Christine. "Death as a Fastball on the Outside Corner. *Fences's* Troy Maxson and the American Dream" in *Aethlon The Journal of Sport Literature,* Vol 8, no I, Fall, 1990, pp 87-96.

Ching, Mei-Ling. "Wrestling against History" in *Theater,* Vol 19, no 3, Summer-Fall, 1988, pp 70-71.

Devries, Hilary. "A Song in Search of Itself" *in American Theatre,* Vol 3, no. 10, January, 1987, pp 22-25.

Elam, Harry J., Jr. "Of Angels and Transcendence' An Analysis of *Fences* by August Wilson and *Roosters* by Milcha Sanchez-Scott" in *Staging Difference Cultural Pluralism in American Theatre and Drama,* edited by Marc Manfort, Peter Lang (New York), 1995, pp. 287-300.

Henderson, Heather. "Building *Fences:* An Interview With Mary Alice and James Earl Jones" in *Theater,* Vol 16, no. 3, Summer-Fall, 1985, pp 67-70.

Pereira, Kim. "August Wilson" in *Reference Guide to American Literature,* edited by Jim Kamp, third edition, SI. James Press, 1994, pp. 919-21.

Shafer, Yvonne. "Breaking Barriers: August Wilson" in *Staging Difference: Cultural Pluralism In American Theatre and Drama,* edited by Marc Manfort, Peter Lang, 1995. pp. 267-85.

Wallach, Allan. "Fenced in by a Lifetime of Resentments" *in Newsday,* March 27, 1987.

Wilson, Edwin. "Wilson's 'Fences' on Broadway" in the *Wall Street Journal,* March 31,1987.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535