

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Fences

by August Wilson

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Fences

Notes

Winner of the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for drama, *Fences* is the story of a disillusioned patriarch and his struggles to claim his place in a world that has no place for him. Set in the 1950s, the play follows four generations of black Americans as they struggle with the fences, both literal and metaphorical, of life. The protagonist is Troy Maxson, a fifty-three year old trash collector who escaped the Jim Crow South only to find segregation and indifference in the industrialized city life of the North.

The play is sure to inspire classroom discussions about racial and economic prejudices, pursuit of the American Dream, a father's right to plot the course of his son's life, and a son's right to challenge his father's authority. Students will be able to draw connections between the struggles of Lyons and Cory with their own growth toward independence.

Fences contains heavy usage of racial epithets that some students may find offensive. Rarely are these epithets used vindictively; rather, they are a reflection of acceptable speech patterns of the day. These epithets lend a certain authenticity to the play, as much of the conversation is informal in an informal setting.

The play contains many allusions to professional baseball and the Negro Leagues, which were precursors to the desegregation of professional sports. There are also a number of cultural references with which students may need to be familiarized.

All references come from the Plume Books edition of *Fences*, copyright 1986.

Fences

Objectives

By the end of this Unit the student will be able to

1. Identify the protagonist and explain why he, rather than any of the other three major characters, is the protagonist.
2. Identify the antagonist(s) of the play from the perspectives of Troy, Rose, Lyons, and Cory.
3. State the literal significance of the play's title, relating it to specific events in the play.
4. State the metaphorical significance of the play's title, relating it to specific events in the play.
5. Recognize shifts in the metaphorical significance of the play's title as seen by Troy, Rose, Lyons, and Cory.
6. Explain the source of Troy's disillusionment and his rationale for committing adultery.
7. Identify and explain the function of a dramatic foil and discuss dramatic foils in the play.
8. Assess whether Troy's failures are a result of his own bad decisions or that of a flawed society.
9. Explain the role of racial prejudice, both real and imagined, in the play.
10. Explain the function of baseball as a symbol in the play.
11. Explain the significance of Gabriel's delusions and how they symbolize hope for the future.
12. Understand the concept of catharsis and explain how Rose's response to Troy's affair strengthens her character.
13. Recognize patterns in the lives of the Maxson men and compare Lyons and Cory to Troy and to each other.
14. Trace the play's exposition, conflict, climax, and denouement.
15. Identify examples of situational irony in the play.
16. Explain the importance of humor in the play, and cite some examples of its use.
17. Discuss the use of songs and music in the play.

Fences

Questions for Essay or Discussion

1. Identify and discuss three conflicts introduced in Act One, Scene One. Based on your knowledge of the character of Troy Maxson, predict the outcomes of these conflicts.
2. How and why do the characters in the play use humor?
3. Compare and contrast Troy's treatment of Lyons and Cory. Does he treat each son fairly? Explain.
4. How does Troy's view of love and marriage differ from Rose's? How does Troy feel about women, and Rose about men?
5. Lyons states, "I know I got to eat. I got to live too." How does Lyons's work ethic differ from Troy's? Is quality of life more important than living according to one's means?
6. How does Troy feel his brother Gabriel was cheated by the U.S. government?
7. What "fence" exists between Troy and Gabriel? In what ways does Troy attempt to break through this barrier?
8. Cory angers Troy by asking, "How come you ain't never liked me?" What is the basis of Troy's response? Does he love his son?
9. Is Troy Maxson a sympathetic character? Support your opinion with evidence from the play.
10. What does Troy want for Cory? Why does Troy experience internal conflict about Cory?
11. Find some examples of fences between or around Troy and the other characters. How does each character feel about these fences? Can some fences be positive or useful?
12. Troy states that the "only thing that separated (Troy from his father) was the matter of a few years." In what ways are their experiences and emotions similar? In what ways has Troy grown beyond his father's scope of behavior?
13. Are Troy's problems the result of character flaws or societal flaws?
14. At the end of Act One, Troy tells Cory, "See, you in the batter's box now. You swung and you missed. That's strike one. Don't you strike out!" Explain how this metaphor serves as both a warning and a challenge for Cory.

Act One, Scene Two

Synopsis

Conflicts begin to build as Troy grumbles about the lottery, lottery winners, Cory's continued involvement in football, and his seeming inability to find the time to build a fence around the yard. Complications in Troy's character are embodied in the arrival of Gabriel, Troy's delusional brother who was injured in World War II.

Vocabulary and References

Archangel Gabriel – angel responsible for sounding the trumpet that will open the gate of Heaven

Numbers – slang for lottery numbers

St. Peter – biblical keeper of Heaven's gate and the Book of Life

1. As the scene opens, Rose sings a hymn. What do fences symbolize for Rose?

2. How does Rose sing to herself? How does this reveal her character?

3. Rose states, "...those that need the least always get lucky. Poor folks can't get nothing." Why, then, does Rose play the lottery?

Act Two, Scene Four

Synopsis

Two months later, Rose has immersed herself in church service. Cory has graduated from high school without a football scholarship. The play shifts into falling action, as the final conflict between Troy and Cory is resolved.

1. What is ironic about Troy's job as a garbage truck driver?

2. How does the final confrontation between Troy and Cory begin? How does it escalate?
