

Fences



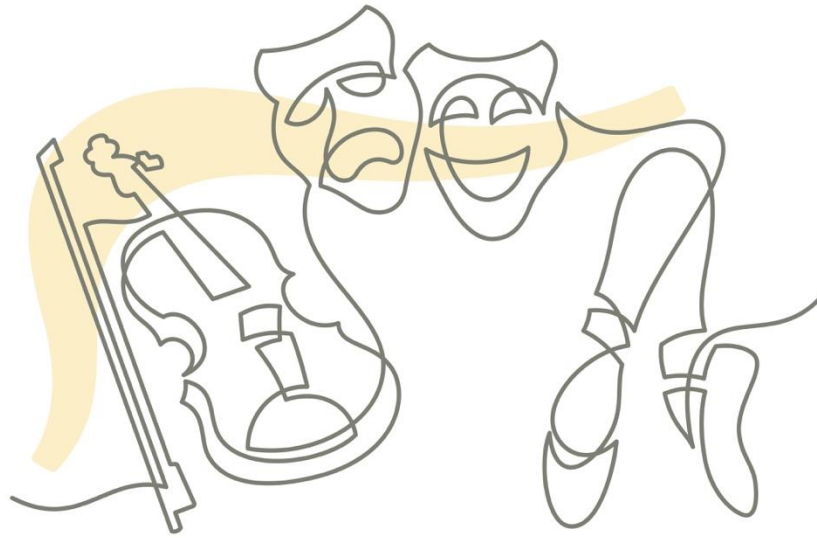
August Wilson's
FENCES

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Centaur Theatre Study Guide

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“You shall not bow yourself down to them, nor serve them. For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons to the third and fourth generation of those that hate me, and showing mercy to thousands of those that love Me and keep My commandments.”

— *The Bible, Exodus, Chapter 20*

“I like to see the difference between good and evil as kind of like the foul line at a baseball game. It's very thin, it's made of something very flimsy like lime, and if you cross it, it really starts to blur where fair becomes foul and foul becomes fair.”

— Harlan Coben

PLAYWRIGHT BIOGRAPHY: August Wilson

August Wilson, originally named Frederick August Kittel Jr., was born April 27, 1945 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Wilson grew up in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, a poor neighbourhood that became the setting for most of his plays. Together with five siblings, he was raised by his mother, Daisy Wilson, after his father, Frederick August Kittel, a German baker, left her and their children. Daisy Wilson later remarried, and in 1958 the family moved to a suburb of Pittsburgh.



August Wilson

Wilson's complex experience of race while growing up is expressed in his plays. His mother and stepfather, David Bedford, were black, while his biological father was white. The Hill District was mostly black, while the suburb of Hazelwood, where he moved as a teen, was predominately white. Wilson and his family were the target of racial threats in Hazelwood, and he quit school at age 15 and began a process of self-education, reading extensively in a public library and returning to the Hill District to learn from residents there. He changed his last name from Kittel to Wilson in the late 1960s, embraced the Black Arts movement, and became the cofounder and director of Black Horizons Theatre in Pittsburgh in 1968. He also published poetry in such journals as *Black World* (1971) and *Black Lines* (1972).

Wilson's greatest contribution to American culture would be his defining 10-play Century Cycle (or Pittsburgh Cycle), a play for each decade of the 20th century. All but one — *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* — are set in the city of Pittsburgh:

1900s: *Gem of the Ocean* (2002)
 1910s: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986)
 1920s: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984)
 1930s: *The Piano Lesson* (1989)
 1940s: *Seven Guitars* (1995)
 1950s: *Fences* (1985)
 1960s: *Two Trains Running* (1990)
 1970s: *Jitney* (1982)
 1980s: *King Hedley II* (2001)
 1990s: *Radio Golf* (2005)

The cycle of plays combines historical fact, humor and realism with spiritual and supernatural elements drawn from African and African-American cultures. The plays, being set in different decades, aim to portray the African-American experience throughout the 20th century.

“I think my plays offer [white Americans] a different way to look at black Americans,” Wilson told *The Paris Review*. “For instance, in *Fences* they see a garbageman, a person they don't really look at, although they see a garbageman every day. By looking at Troy's life, white people find out that the content of this black garbageman's life is affected by the same things – love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty. Recognizing that these things are as much part of his life as theirs can affect how they think about and deal with black people in their lives.”

Fences is set in the 1950s and is the sixth in Wilson's ten-part Pittsburgh Cycle, exploring the evolving African-American experience and examining race relations, among other themes. The play was first developed at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's 1983 National Playwrights Conference and premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1985. The play's first Broadway production was staged at the 46th Street Theatre on March 26, 1987, and closed on June 26, 1988, after 525 performances. *Fences* won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the 1987 Tony Award for Best Play.

In addition to Wilson's Pulitzer Prizes for *Fences* and for *The Piano Lesson*, he received Great Britain's Oliver Award for *Jitney*, as well as seven New York Drama Critics Circle Awards for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, and *Jitney*. The August Wilson Center for African American Culture opened in Pittsburgh in 2009, and throughout his lifetime Wilson was awarded several honorary degrees and held Guggenheim and Rockefeller fellowships. Today Wilson is considered one of the most important 20th century American playwrights.

Wilson was married three times. His daughter Sakina Ansari was born in 1970, during his short-lived marriage to his first wife, Brenda Burton. In 1981 he married Judy Oliver, a social worker; they divorced in 1990. He married again in 1994 and was survived by his third wife, costume designer Constanza Romero, whom he met on the set of *The Piano Lesson*. They had a daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson. August Wilson was diagnosed with liver cancer in June 2005 and died on October 2, 2005, aged 60.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Troy Maxson

Jim Bono: Troy's friend

Rose: Troy's wife

Lyons: Troy's oldest son by a previous marriage

Gabriel: Troy's brother

Cory: Troy and Rose's son

Raynell: Troy's daughter

SYNOPSIS

In a note about the setting prefacing the play, August Wilson stipulates that “the setting is the yard which fronts the only entrance to the Maxson household, an ancient two-storey brick house set back off a small alley in a big-city neighborhood.” While the characters’ dialogue in the play refers to many other places of imagined action (and the 2016 film version of *Fences* actually shows these other settings), Wilson’s play confines its action to this singular locale. One reason for this is to emphasize the claustrophobic nature of the life of the main character, Troy Maxson. Another reason is to keep a continual focus on the progress Troy makes in constructing the fence around this yard, a central motif of the play. It is in this small yard that all of the characters interact and where all of their conflicts, as well as some tender moments, take place.

The year is 1957. Troy is an African-American garbage man supporting a wife and two sons (one of whom, Lyons, is from a previous marriage), and bearing the burden of a brother disabled from his participation in World War II. Troy is big, brash, a has-been baseball legend among his friends, and above all, a storyteller. It is on Friday nights like the one that opens the play that Troy can be found passing a bottle of gin back and forth with his best friend Bono, joking, talking about his fearless demand for a promotion at work, and declaring his love for his wife, Rose.

The yard is also where we see the darker side of Troy’s life. We learn that he has been pursuing another woman, Alberta. We see him belittle his first son, Lyons, by casting him as a freeloader whose passion for music is not worth Troy’s time. With his second son, Cory, Troy is brutally strict, refusing to even meet with the football recruiter that offers Cory a chance to go to college. Troy had a passion for baseball, but he feels his ambitions were thwarted by systemic racism (even though Rose says he was too old to make the big leagues), and he says he wants to spare his son the same fate. Cory sees this quashed opportunity for a better life as a sign that Troy does not love him, and after a physical fight with Troy that is reminiscent of Troy’s own beating at the hands of his father, the 17-year-old leaves to join the Marines. Troy argues throughout the play that he has always tried to do what’s best for his family, that he has given everything he has, but his moral descent culminates with his committal of Gabe, his brother, to a mental hospital so that he can obtain half of Gabe’s government allowance, and the revelation to Rose that he has fathered a child with Alberta.

Finally, it is in this yard that, seven years after the play's opening scene, Troy swings at the baseball made of rags hanging from the tree and collapses with a heart attack. The final scene sees a reconciliation of sorts among the remaining characters who gather for Troy's funeral.

TOPICS and THEMES

1. Storytelling / oral traditions
2. Epic narrative / mythologies
3. Racialized language
4. Institutionalized racism
5. Prejudice in the workplace
6. Hypocrisy / internalizing racism
7. The African-American experience
8. The American Dream
9. Morality / what is a good life?
10. Breaking with the past
11. Inner demons
12. Intergenerational trauma / father-son relationships
13. Gender roles / politics of marriage
14. Responsibility vs. control
15. Ideas of freedom
16. Love, beauty and death

RESEARCH QUESTIONS / PRESHOW PREPARATION

1. In preparation for seeing the play, research the following topics:
 - a) *The Iliad*. The main character of Wilson's play is named Troy, which was the city at the heart of the Trojan War. What are the main themes and characteristics of Homer's epic poem?
 - b) Realism / naturalism. What do these literary movements have in common and how are they different?
 - c) Sojourner Truth and *Othello*, Act 4, scene 3. Read or listen to Sojourner Truth's famous speech "Ain't I a Woman" (and for a deeper understanding of its representation see <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/>) and Emilia's speech at the end of Act 4, scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Othello*. When you watch the play, listen for a speech that echoes these passages.
 - d) Uncle Remus. Who wrote the Uncle Remus stories? Was he white or black? What controversy arose in the mid-20th century regarding these stories? You can read the two famous "Tar Baby" stories at: <http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/texts/remus.htm>
 - e) *Bible* figures.
 - i) Who is the Archangel Gabriel and what role does he play in the *Bible*?
 - ii) Read about Jacob wrestling with the Angel in *Genesis*, chapter 32, verses 22-32. How is this story interpreted by various religions (e.g. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, etc.)?

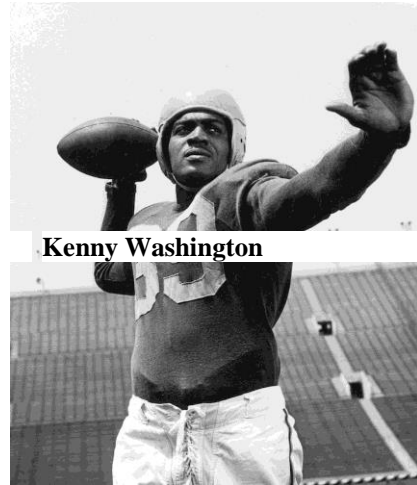
2. In his prologue to the play, August Wilson describes the different experiences European immigrants and African-Americans had in America at the turn of the 20th century. By 1957, after years of hard work, many of the European immigrants had lives that were “rich, full, and flourishing,” according to Wilson. In general, what were the lives of black Americans like at that time? What social, economic, and political circumstances did black Americans find themselves in?

3. Jackie Robinson broke the baseball “color barrier” when the Brooklyn Dodgers started him at first base in 1947, and Kenny Washington was the first African-American signed by an NFL team the year before. In some ways pro sports was an entry point for blacks into American society. However, racism and segregation continued to suffuse the sport throughout the 1950s. What was it like to be a professional black athlete at this time?

4. Trigger warning: in the play you will hear the “N-word” used several times. The way in which this word was used (by both blacks and whites) was different in 1957 (when the play is set) than it was in 1985 (when the play was written) or than it is today.



Jackie Robinson



Kenny Washington

Investigate the ways in which blacks self-identified and were identified by others over the course of

their history in North America. (Articles like

<https://www.cnn.com/2014/02/19/living/biracial-black-identity-answers/index.html> could be helpful). How did these epithets change and why? How did this naming differ in Canada and the United States?

For an interesting interactive approach to this subject, check out the Washington Post’s “The N-word”:

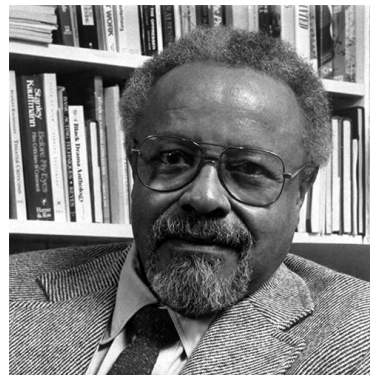


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Epic narratives tell of “a time beyond living memory in which occurred the extraordinary doings of the extraordinary men and women who, in dealings with the gods or other superhuman forces, gave shape to the moral universe that their descendants . . . must understand to understand themselves as a people or nation” (Michael Meyer, *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*). In *A Handbook to Literature* (1999), Harmon and Holman give ten main characteristics of an epic:

- a) Begins with an invocation to a muse (epic invocation).
- b) Begins with a statement of the theme.
- c) Starts “in medias res”.
- d) The setting is vast, covering many nations, the world or the universe.
- e) Includes the use of epithets.
- f) Contains long lists, called an epic catalogue.
- g) Features long and formal speeches.
- h) Shows divine intervention in human affairs.
- i) Features heroes that embody the values of the civilization.
- j) Often features the tragic hero’s descent into the underworld or hell.

Wilson dedicates *Fences* to Lloyd Richards, who, as a friend and mentor, could be seen as the playwright’s muse (“a”), above); the play also contains an epigraph (unusually, quoting the playwright himself) and opening statement that set out the theme of the work (“b”) above). How does the play fulfil the other eight criteria put forward by Harmon and Holman, suggesting Wilson wanted the play to be seen as an epic? (Hint: for “d”), consider Gabriel’s view of the world).



Lloyd Richards

2. With your knowledge of one of the most famous of all epics, *The Iliad*, why do you think Wilson linked his story to Homer’s through the structure of the play and the name of his main character?

3. Did you notice the speech in the play that has echoes of Sojourner Truth and Shakespeare’s Emilia? What do you think Wilson was saying about the role of (black) women in 1957? What do you think he’s saying about the importance of black women’s roles within families? He wrote the play in 1985: do you think he was commenting on these roles in his own time? Are these roles substantially different today?

4. Consider the title of the play. At the beginning of Act 1, scene 2, Rose sings “Jesus, be a fence all around me every day / Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way.” And later Bono says: “Some people build fences to keep people out . . . and other people build fences to keep people in.” What do you think the fence represents in this play? How do the different characters in the play view the idea of being fenced in or of fencing in others (e.g. the disagreement Troy and Rose have about institutionalizing Gabriel)? What

do you make of the fact that Troy seems to resist working on the fence for much of the play but finally finishes it only once all of his close relationships (with Bono, Rose and Cory) have been broken?

5. Why do you think the playwright gave his characters their names? Troy Maxson (consider both his first name and being “Son of Max”), Cory, Lyons, Rose, and Gabriel all have names that can be seen as being relevant to their characters. (If you find it helpful, do an internet search for the origins or meanings of these names.)

6. The “N-word”

a) Why do you think Troy uses the “N-word” so much throughout the play (Bono uses it too, but not as much as Troy does, while the other characters seem to avoid it)? Do you think it is a way that Troy sees or presents himself as a victim? Or do you think he is reclaiming the word as an act of power; in the same way some people use the word “queer” today?

b) Do you think it is acceptable for anyone to use the “N-word” in society today? Consider the opinions of two Americans, [Brando Simeo Starkey](#) and [Geoffrey Stone](#) on this question. Do you agree with their views? Does historical context and/or the identity of the speaker have any bearing on whether speech is acceptable or not?

7. A *conceit* is an extended metaphor that can run through an entire literary work. How does the game of baseball act as a conceit throughout Wilson’s play?

8. When Rose learns that Troy is going to have a baby with another woman, she says:

I ain’t never wanted no half nothing in my family. My whole family is half. Everybody got different fathers and mothers . . . my two sisters and my brother. Can’t hardly tell who’s who. Can’t never sit down and talk about Papa and Mama. It’s your papa and your mama and my papa and my mama...I ain’t never wanted that for none of my children.

How does the fact that Troy has three children with three different women and that Rose agrees to raise them colour her relationship with her husband (and these children)? What does Rose sacrifice in agreeing to do this?

9. The reason Rose gives when she finally agrees to take care of Troy and Alberta’s baby is that the baby is innocent and “you can’t visit the sins of the father upon the child.” How does this quotation capture, to a significant extent, the theme of Wilson’s play?

10. In Rose’s long speech near the end of the play, she tells Cory, “Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn’t . . . and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was.” What does she mean by this seeming paradox? She concludes by saying that Troy gave the best of what was in him to Cory. Do you think this is true?

11. Throughout the play Troy is verbally and physically abusive towards his son Cory. His style of parenting not only arises from his own abusive father, whom he describes in the play to Lyons and Bono in Act One, but is also typical of an authoritarian style of parenting that was not uncommon in 1950s America and even today. Authoritarian parenting is:

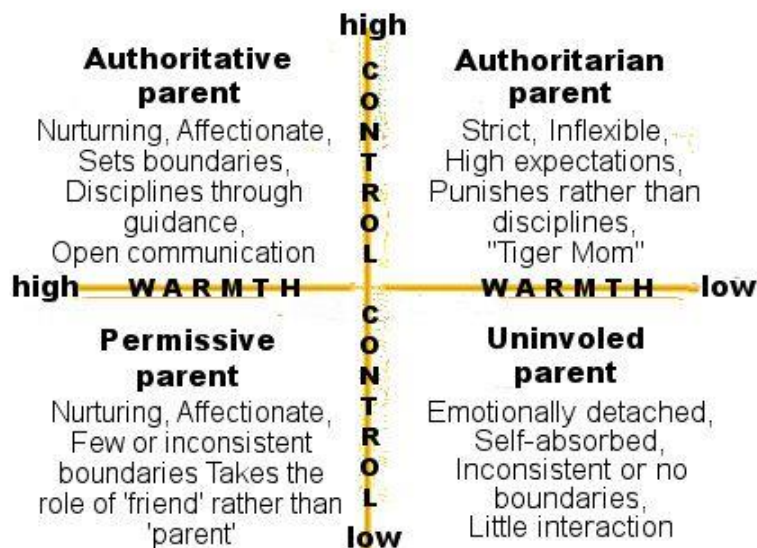
a parenting style characterized by high demands and low responsiveness. Parents with an authoritarian style have very high expectations of their children, yet provide very little in the way of feedback and nurturance.

Mistakes tend to be punished harshly. When feedback does occur, it is often negative. Yelling and corporal punishment are also commonly seen in the authoritarian style.

(<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-authoritarian-parenting-2794955>)

Students are encouraged to reflect on the following parenting styles:

PARENTING STYLES



Where do your parents fall on this grid? If you were to have a child, what kind of parent would you be? What is the prevailing parenting style today? Do you think this is a good approach?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. In the play Cory wants to play football, but his father won't allow it. The closest he gets to opening up to his father is when he asks him "How come you ain't never liked me?" Have you ever deeply desired to do something that your parent(s) wouldn't allow? Write a letter to your parent(s) expressing your desire, why you feel justified in pursuing it, and how the refusal of your parent(s) has made you feel. If your personal situation doesn't provide material for this letter, consider writing one that Cory might have presented to his father.

2. At the end of the play Rose tells Cory that his father treated him as he did out of love because he was trying to ensure Cory would have a better life than he has had himself. What we see in the play, however, is a brutal father's violent rejection of his son. Considering that Troy's worries about race, financial insecurity, Cory's grades, losing his part-time job, and his helping around the house, are valid concerns, how would you react if *you* were Cory's father? With a partner, write a scene of dialogue in which your son approaches you with the news that he is being recruited by a college football scout and wants to try to make the big leagues. What would *you* tell your son, and how would the conversation end?

3. In the play Troy is illiterate but seems to navigate his way through his personal and work life fairly successfully with his larger-than-life personality and his gift as a storyteller. For example, at the beginning of the play, Troy describes how he asked his boss, Mr. Rand, ““Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting? . . . what’s the matter, don’t I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck. That ain’t no paper job!””

Troy wants to know why he and his black co-workers are only assigned the “lifting” jobs. Mr. Rand instructs Troy to speak with the union. Since Troy cannot write out a formal complaint, what might his oral defense of his right to a driver’s job sound like? With a partner, write a 150-250 word monologue in which Troy delivers an impassioned and persuasive speech (expanding on what he says above) that convinces the Commissioner’s Office, the union and Mr. Rand that he deserves the opportunity to be a driver.

4. When one cannot read, one is excluded from many of the things that allow one to be fully functional as a citizen. Those who are illiterate can lack access to information, are excluded from making choices about their rights or government through informed voting, and have fewer opportunities for employment. Illiteracy keeps people trapped in a cycle of poverty and subjugation, limiting life choices and making it difficult to achieve social mobility. Literacy truly is power—power over one’s own life.

With a partner, write a list of all of the ways in which being illiterate would affect your day-to-day life in Quebec, as well as how it would impact your future. What would your life be like practically, emotionally and socially? How would you cope? Share your list and ideas with the class.

5. Hold a classroom debate on the following topic:
Be It Resolved That Quebec is a place where institutional racism is a significant problem.
(Alternate topic: substitute “Canada” for “Quebec”).