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Literature
Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Fences: A Play

by August Wilson

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938
www.prestwickhouse.com
800.932.4593

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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.

Fences

Act One, Scene One

Synopsis

The play opens with a Friday evening exchange between Troy Maxson and his friend Jim Bono. Though given to good-natured ribbing, Troy clearly takes the leadership role in the relationship and is established as the central character. Two possible conflicts are almost immediately introduced: Troy has appealed to his union representative regarding the absence of black drivers on the trash routes and Troy admits that, despite his longstanding marriage to Rose, he is involved with another woman, Alberta. The subplots also begin to emerge in the form of Cory's football scholarship opportunity and Lyons' pursuit of music over legitimate work.

Vocabulary and References

Part of the charm and power of *Fences* is its unpretentious language. The language is simplistic because the characters are largely uneducated and/or illiterate. This simplicity, however, does not hamper the depth of expression achieved by the characters.

A & P – a grocery store chain

“Eating beans” – a slang expression that means one has run out of money and can not afford more expensive food items, like meats.

Uncle Remus – American folktale icon, famous for such tales as “Tar Baby” and “Brer Rabbit”

1. In the opening stage directions, what aspects about Troy Maxson are revealed?

2. What do you think is significant about the first line?

3. What policy does Troy challenge at the sanitation department?

Act One, Scene Three

Synopsis

The scene opens four hours later, as Cory comes home from football practice. Troy and Cory begin building the fence around the yard, and also begin building a metaphorical fence between themselves. This scene features multiple allusions to baseball and great baseball players of the era. Troy's internal conflicts continue to build steam as he deals with Cory in a much different manner than he did previously with Lyons.

1. Why is Troy unable to tell Rose the score of the baseball game?

2. How does Troy exercise his authority over Cory? Why does he feel the need to reassert his authority?

3. In what ways does Cory attempt to seek his father's approval?

4. Why does Troy tell Cory that he will not give permission for Cory to play college football?

5. Troy advises Cory to "learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage." How is this advice different from the advice he gives Lyons earlier in the play?

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?
