

Booknotes for Fences

Authorial Background:

August Wilson joined the highest level of American playwrights with the success of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, voted Best Play of 1984-85 by the New York Drama Critics' Circle. A poet turned playwright, he makes his home in St. Paul, Minnesota. His third play, Joe Turner's Come and Gone, received its first production at the Yale Repertory Theater in 1986. Wilson has taken the responsibility of explaining the meeting of released black slaves and a vigorous, growing America. Wilson wanted to tell the story of four African-American generations have passed on through morals and traditions, and this is what he did in Fences.

Literary Period/Country:

Realistic Drama, America

Setting:

The setting is not a real place, but is fabricated from stage props. The main setting is the Maxson household, an ancient two-story brick house set within a small alley in an urban neighborhood. A sturdy porch with a flat roof is at the front of the house, overlooking the yard. The small dirt yard is partially fenced until the final scene, where fence-building equipment is brought in. Dramatically, the setting takes place in 1957, just before the start of the Civil Rights Movement.

Characters:

Troy Maxson: a fifty-three year old large black man with thick, heavy hands. His family and friends seem to think he is honest, strong, a hard-working person, and practical, but he feels that he does not set a good example. He drinks, tells tall tales, and feels that taking care of his son is a responsibility and nothing more. He is bitter about his past and being black. Later, he becomes a disturbed, angry man, causing his friends and family to desert him.

Jim Bono: Troy's friend. He stayed friends with Troy because he thought he was honest, strong, and hard-working. He is a person whom Troy can confide in, since he neither adds or objects to most things Troy says; when Troy gets angry, Bono remains calm. When Troy dies at the end, he seems indifferent about his death.

Rose: Troy's wife, forty-three years old. She either ignores or forgives her husband for his faults, believing that Troy is a good man. She had lived with abusive men and their babies, partied, and ran the streets. That is why she is devoted to her husband, although

Lyons: Troy's oldest son, thirty-three years old, by a previous marriage. He wears a neat goatee, sport coat, white shirt, tieless and buttoned at the collar. He thinks of himself as a musician but does not practice the music. He doesn't have a job, so comes to his father often to borrow money.

Gabriel: he is Troy's brother, seven years younger than him. In World War II, he was injured and had to have a metal plate placed in his head. He carries an old trumpet tied around his waist and believes that he is the Archangel Gabriel.

Cory: Troy and Rose's son, who had gotten recruited by a college basketball team. He is discouraged by his father because Troy believes a career in football can do nothing for his life; he is dissatisfied with his father's way of doing things and is determined to be independent. When Troy dies, Cory has become a corporal in the Marines and has a fine job.

Theme:

The main theme of the play is very subtle: it is about fences. The "fences" in the play are actions that Troy did to keep things and people out or in of his life, and the situations that caused Troy to become bitter toward life. One of these fences is being black: because Troy was black, he could not play professional baseball. From being black, Troy learns that chances for him to find a good job and live comfortably are not always good. A personal fence built by Troy is one that keeps him from living a good life: he is pessimistic, believing that Death is constantly after him. He doesn't want anyone in his family to accomplish something he couldn't do; when Cory wants to play football, Troy objects because he couldn't, and perhaps because Gabriel has to worry less about life than he does, he is envious and sends him to the hospital. Because of his objections and his anger, his family and friends begin to separate themselves from him.

Plot Summary:

Troy, the main character, had wanted to do so much in his life. However, he had been denied baseball because he was black, later becoming disgruntled at anything that was contrary to his ways. He became a drunk, voicing his troubles to everyone. Around himself he began to build a fence; he estranged his son Cory because Cory wanted to do something he could not do, he began spending time with another woman besides his wife, and he sent his brother Gabriel away to the hospital. His family begins to leave him, and he dies uneventfully.

Author's Unique Style:

August Wilson writes Fences as a play so the characters' dialogues can effectively reveal their thoughts. Meant to be performed, the play would undoubtedly show Troy's changing demeanor towards his family. However, the most important use of style is the metaphor: the name of the play's title, Fences, is an example of this. Wilson compares an ordinary fence to a situation or state of mind that causes one's separation from other people. In this way, many "fences" are described in the work. There is also much symbolism used; Troy wrestles with Death to explain how he must fight to survive, and Gabriel's obsession with being an archangel from heaven gives a feeling of hope to the play. In the end, though Gabriel has been waiting to blow his horn for a long time, he realizes his limitations but accepts them anyway. This is something that Troy cannot do.

Quotes:

1. "Then when I saw that gal. . . she firmed up my backbone. And I got to thinking that if I tried. . . I just might be able to steal second. Do you understand after eighteen years I wanted to steal second" (70). Troy is still obsessed with baseball and, though he is speaking to his wife about his infidelity, he mindlessly equates this act with baseball.
2. "I ain't making up nothing. I'm telling you the facts of what happened. I wrestled with Death for three days and three nights and I'm standing here to tell you about it" (12). This quote highlights Troy's belief that Death is after him and that he must constantly fight to survive.
3. "I'm talking, woman, let me talk. I'm trying to find a way to tell you. . . I'm gonna be a daddy. I'm gonna be somebody's daddy. . . You telling me you gonna be somebody's daddy? You telling your wife this?" (66). Troy's indifference toward his family, his willingness to have an affair with another woman, is shown.

4. "He puts the end of it into his mouth and blows with great force, like a man who has been waiting some twenty-odd years for this moment. No sound comes out of the trumpet. . . There is a weight of impossible description that falls away and leaves him bare and exposed to a frightful realization. . . He begins to dance. . . He begins to howl in what is an attempt at song, or perhaps a song turning back into itself in an attempt at speech. He finishes his dance and the gates of heaven stand open as wide as God's closet. 'That's the way that go!'" (101). Gabriel shows his dedication to his beliefs. Although he realizes for the first time that he may not be the archangel Gabriel, he accepts that fact with simplicity, unlike Troy's long-lasting grudges against family and society.
5. "Some people build fences to keep people out. . . and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you" (61). Bono explains the meaning of Fences in this quote, hoping to inform Troy of how he was pushing his family away.

Glossary:

1. Metaphor: a statement comparing two unlike things without using like or as; speaking of one thing in terms of another. In the play, personal, emotional "fences" are spoken of in terms of solid, material fences.
2. Symbolism: any object or event that suggests other meanings than itself. The fence Troy is building around his house also has a separate meaning; that fence symbolizes a self-built wall around his house to keep his family away from him.
3. Vernacular: the use of language that resembles the way people speak in a certain region; the native language or spoken language mostly used. Like the vernacular but different are colloquialisms, informal (spoken) language, and slang. Phrases such as "I ain't mad at you" and "What he move over there for?" illustrate the way people speak in the Maxson household.
4. Dialogue: the designation of a conversation between two or more characters. This is used often to highlight the characters' emotions and dispositions, as in this quote: "Thanks, Rose. Look. . . I got to run. . . I'll see you later." "Wait a minute. You gonna say, 'thanks, Rose' and ain't gonna look to see where she got that ten dollars from? See how they do me, Bono?" (19).
5. Ambiguity: multiple meanings a literary work may communicate. Though the structure Troy is building around his house is called a wooden fence, the reader also understands that this fence is similar to many other personal fences Troy is erecting around himself.
6. Realism: a style of writing that represents life as real as possible, the way life really is. It is often harsh instead of gentle, and is characterized by forthright, open dialogue and narration. In the play, there is no problem with voicing out vulgar diction when the characters feel a need to say it. "Boy, your mama did a hell of a job raising you" (18).

Completed on May 23, 1997.