



Set Text Guide: Fences

AS and A Level Drama and Theatre

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

**Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in
Drama and Theatre (9DR0)**

GCE Drama 2016: Fences

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Summary

Act One

Scene 1

The Maxson yard, Friday night

Troy and his friend Bono enter, drinking. This is their Friday-night ritual. Troy has complained to the union that black men are not allowed to drive the rubbish trucks and are instead left to do the lifting. He has been summoned to the commissioner's office next Friday. Bono teases Troy about Alberta, a girl he has seen him 'eyeing'. Troy argues that he eyes all the women, and that he hasn't chased women since he and Rose have been married.

Rose enters and asks Bono if he wishes to stay for supper; he declines. Troy tells the tale of how they came to marry. He spins a wicked yarn, and how much truth is to be taken from his words is often unsure. Troy and Rose bicker, Troy bemoaning how their son Cory wants to play football rather than learn a trade. It emerges that Troy was an excellent baseball player, but through his own experiences he does not think that a black man should play sports, as the odds are so stacked against him. Rose accuses him of drinking himself to death, but Troy tells of how he fought and defeated death (he had pneumonia 16 years ago), but he knows that death will find him eventually. These encounters with the fictional character of death continue throughout the play, foreshadowing Troy's death at the end.

Lyons, Troy's son from a previous marriage, arrives. Troy knows why he is here. After a little protestation to the contrary, Lyons asks Troy for \$10. Troy tells a fanciful story of an extortionate credit deal he struck on the furniture in his house with 'the devil'. Rose says he is lying. He is, and has been pulling their legs. Lyons claims he cannot find a decent job, to which Troy offers to get him work in rubbish. Lyons says that isn't for him. His father explains that 'life don't owe you nothing'. He hands over his wages to Rose, who immediately gives Lyons the \$10. The scene ends with Troy jovially warning that Bono shouldn't call round on Monday morning, as he and Rose will 'still be stroking'.

Scene 2

The yard, next morning

Rose is singing while hanging up clothes. Troy enters and bemoans her playing 'the numbers', or lottery. He enquires as to the whereabouts of Cory, only to learn from Rose that he has gone to football practice.

Troy's brother Gabe enters, singing. He has brain damage from the war and believes he is the archangel Gabriel. He believes that Troy is mad at him for having moved into Miss Pearl's. He tells of how he has seen St Peter's list, and that Troy's name is on it. He exits, singing again.

The scene ends with Troy ceding that if it weren't for the compensation from Gabe's injury, he wouldn't have his house. He leaves to go to Taylors', the place where Bono has previously accused him of eyeing Alberta.

Scene 3

The yard, four hours later

Rose is taking the clothes down off the line when Cory enters carrying his football equipment. He is immediately set to his chores by his mother.

Troy returns from Taylors', though suspiciously he doesn't remember the score of the game. He flirts with Rose, trying to kiss her.

Troy calls Cory out and confronts him. Cory asks his father why he doesn't buy a TV. Troy explains he needs to fix the roof first, then goes on to dissuade Cory from sports,

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saying that sports are not for the black man. Cory tells him that he has quit his job to practise football. The news is immediately quashed by Troy, who orders him to go and get his job back. Tensions flare, as Cory asks his father why he 'never liked' him. We see Troy's absolute ethos here. He explains that he doesn't have to like him, and that his responsibility is to clothe and feed his family. Rose enters and tries to persuade Troy to let him play football, and that times have changed. Troy methodically explains that he does the best he can, and that it is all he has got. He can 'give nothing else'.

Scene Four

The yard, Friday, two weeks later

Cory is leaving the house as his friend Jesse calls on the phone. He has made a mess of his room looking for spikes to lend to Jesse. Rose asks him to clean his room before his father gets back but Cory ignores this and goes to his game, saying he will do it when he gets back.

Troy and Bono enter drinking again, talking about Troy's visit to the commissioner's office. Troy calls Rose out; she accuses him of treating her like a dog, to which he begins to sing a song about his old dog, Blue. Troy reveals that as opposed to being fired, as many had thought, he is being made a driver, the first black man to do so.

Lyons enters. Troy is angry at him for hanging out with the 'thugs' at Sefus' place, but Lyons goes there for the good music. Bono asks if Mr Rand knows Troy doesn't have a driver's licence. Troy shrugs this off, claiming driving is easy. He expects Lyons to be looking for more money, though he is actually here to pay off his \$10 debt. Troy now doesn't want to accept it. Instead Lyons gives the money to Rose, who also takes Troy's wage, allowing Troy to still moan about it.

Gabe enters, singing again. He gives Rose a rose and she makes him a sandwich. Lyons discovers Cory has the chance to be recruited by a school to play football, but Troy refutes this, claiming he is disobeying him. Troy then tells the story of his relationship with his father and how he left home at 14 years old. Lyons has not heard the story before. It is clear that Troy had a very violent and troubled childhood, and though he saw his father as the devil, some of his traits and beliefs appear to be hereditary.

Cory returns home, livid that his father has told his coach he can't play football anymore. Troy reasons that he lied to him and therefore is being punished. Troy menacingly warns his son that this is strike one, and he doesn't want to strike out.

Act Two

Scene One

The yard, the following morning

Cory is hitting the ball on the tree, as he tells his mother he is not quitting the football team. Rose promises to talk to Troy when he gets back from bailing Gabe out of jail.

Troy and Bono return, it has cost him \$50 to bail out his brother. Bono again says he has seen Troy 'laughing and joking' with Alberta. Every time he brings her up he is as good as warning Troy off her, without explicitly saying it. This dramatic irony builds for the audience every time she is mentioned, as Troy's infidelity is becoming obvious.

Cory enters and Troy sets him to sawing wood. Cory enquires as to why his mother wants a fence built around the yard. Poignantly Bono explains, 'Some people build fences to keep people out... and other people build fences to keep people in.' This quote could almost be taken as the tagline for the play; it could be explored as to how this quote applies to the different characters who are in the yard throughout. Troy sends Cory into the house on a meaningless errand to be alone with Bono and press him for what he means by this. Bono now explicitly warns his friend and tells him 'Rose a good woman'. Troy admits he is seeing Alberta; he thanks Bono for being a good friend and says he would call him up on it if he were cheating on his wife too. They strike a bet that when Troy finishes building Rose's fence, Bono will buy Lucille a refrigerator.

As Bono leaves, Rose enters. She asks what happened with Gabe, but Troy clearly has something to get off his chest. He fumbles his way around it at first, talking in similes. Finally, he comes out with it. He is going to be a father to Alberta's child. This is a huge revelation and probably the most significant one in the play. Gabe enters right at this moment, a perfect device to stretch out the tension. He has brought Rose another rose. He talks to them both, oblivious to what has just happened and unable to pick up on the atmosphere. Finally Rose persuades Gabe to go inside and is left to ask Troy why. His excuse is that he was spending time with Alberta to escape, and that it is not Rose's fault. He says he feels like he has been standing in the same place for 18 years. She exclaims that she has 'been standing with' him! She bashes him for always talking about what he gives, but not realising everything that he takes. This causes him to grab her arm. He is hurting her. Here we see a flash of the violence learned from his father.

Troy enters, comes up behind his father, grabs him and throws a glancing blow that catches him on the chest and knocks him to the ground. Troy gets to his feet and restrains himself, before warning that this is strike two. Cory is one away from being struck out. This baseball analogy is a brilliant way of increasing the stakes, and the audience are now very aware that the play is hurtling towards this strike-out conclusion, and will be wondering what exactly this means. The stakes feel high enough that Troy may even try to kill his own son.

Scene Two

The yard, six months later

Troy enters from the house to leave the yard and is stopped by Rose, who wants to talk. He is bullish as she asks whether he will be coming home tomorrow night as it is Friday. He argues that he comes home 365 nights a year, but she doesn't mean ultimately, she means directly from work, instead of going to see Alberta first. Here we see that despite six months passing he is still living with Rose, and still seeing Alberta. He tells her that the baby may be coming early and he is going to the hospital. Now Rose drops that Gabe has been taken to an asylum after Troy has signed papers allowing it. He cannot read, and seemingly is unaware of what he signed, thinking he signed a release form. He goes into denial about it. The phone rings and Rose answers. It is the hospital. Alberta has had a baby girl but she herself has died during labour.

The scene ends with Troy alone in the yard and he confronts death again, telling him that he is building a fence around his yard and he is ready for him when he comes. This is an important theme in the play, and foreshadows Troy's imminent death, as it did the first time he spoke of his victory over death.

Scene Three

The yard, three days later, late evening

Troy enters, carrying the baby. After a long pause, he asks Rose if she will take the baby in as her surrogate mother. She ignores him and goes inside. He talks to the baby loudly, so Rose can hear inside, and sings a lullaby. Eventually Rose agrees to take the child, but will not take Troy back.

Scene Four

The yard, two months later

Lyons calls round to give Troy \$20 he has borrowed. We learn that the baby is called Raynell. The suspense here is in waiting to find out what the arrangement is, as Troy is seemingly still around. As Lyons makes to leave, Cory enters. He is trying, unsuccessfully, to find a job, after missing out on football at college thanks to his father. This pangs tragically, as the audience are aware of the missed opportunity for Cory at the hands of his old-fashioned and stubborn father. Lyons leave Cory to swing the baseball bat at an imaginary ball, but Troy's arrival prompts Cory to leave too. Rose is leaving to go to a bakesale; she does not wish to talk to him but tells him his dinner is on the stove. The audience might be incredulous by this point that she is still doing this for

him, though it goes to her character that she is so caring as to take in Raynell as her own.

Bono arrives, but things seem different between them now. They are frosty to each other, and clearly don't partake in their Friday-night ritual anymore. We see that Troy's mistake has cost him everything, as even his loyal friend feels betrayed by him. They are still civil with each other, and part on the word that the fence is finished and the refrigerator is bought. This seems a significant closure to their relationship, and Bono exits to play dominoes with some other men.

Troy drinks alone, singing the song about his old dog Blue. Cory returns and tries to step over his father to get inside. This is the touch paper that ignites the ultimate confrontation between the two. They argue over what Troy has done for Cory. It is a clash of beliefs in what fatherhood means and requires. Troy tells him to leave his yard and his son's refusal provokes him to back him up against the tree. This is the highest point of tension in the play, as we fear death could well be imminent for either of the two. A scuffle ensues with the baseball bat, and Troy, surprisingly, overpowers Cory. He stands over him, his son's life in his hands, but he stops himself and Cory gets up and leaves. It is interesting to explore the significance of this decision by Troy, as were he to have murdered his son, his character would be beyond redemption. The scene ends with him swinging the bat and inviting death to 'come on'. He has a renewed brashness about him after his recent victory, though there is a resignation that death is coming for him one final time.

Scene Five

The yard, seven years later

Raynell is seven and is outside waiting for her garden to grow. Cory enters, wearing a Marine corporal's uniform. He meets Raynell, seemingly for the first time since she was a baby. Lyons and Bono also enter. It becomes clear that they are here for a funeral, and that it must be for Troy. We learn that Gabe is still in the hospital, but may be granted release to attend.

Cory reveals that he is not going to attend the funeral. This is a final rejection of his father. He tells Rose that he feels he must say no to him once, and this is his final chance. Rose pleads with him to come; he says he always felt like he was in his father's shadow. Rose soliloquises that he is both his own self and he is also his father. It is significant that despite his shortcomings in life, there was something in Troy that has caused his loved ones to honour him in death, to this point all but Cory at least. The phone rings, and Rose leaves Cory alone with his estranged half-sister Raynell. They sing Troy's song about Blue together, and find common ground in it. Cory seems to forgive his father in this moment, as he sees that despite his own difficult coming of age, his father has left good in Raynell, and she is not and will not be affected by his old-fashioned view of the world, and offers the promise of better things to come. He changes his mind and goes to the funeral.

The play ends with the arrival of Gabe, who finally gets his chance to tell St Peter to open the gates for his brother. The final moments are described as stage directions. He blows his trumpet but no sound comes out, at which he is devastated, and he comes to a shattering realisation. He begins to dance a strange dance and howl to the skies. Finally, the gates of heaven open and he exclaims, 'That's the way that go!' It seems he has been successful.

Characters

Troy Maxson

The protagonist. In many ways, Troy lives in an alternative reality. He is a responsible man who has had his dreams dashed, and therefore imposes his views of the world on his family and those around him. A reformed criminal, he imposes his values of responsibility to his family rigidly, though this causes much of the conflict with the other characters in the play.

Often it seems that his stories are not true, or at least are a twist on the truth. You might say that Troy is caught between two worlds: the slavery faced by his father and the hope and opportunity of the modern age. His existence in this middle ground causes his hypocrisy. For example, though he expects others to uphold his values of family, he has an extra-marital affair and fathers a child to another woman.

Throughout the play, he grapples with a fictional death character. This foreshadows his own death throughout. The tragedy is that his death sets the other characters free, though they still come together to mourn his passing. He is a restrictive link to the past, though when he is gone, Cory and Raynell sing his song together, a link to their history which is only a story and not an obstacle to their opportunities in life anymore. One interpretation of the title might be that Troy has been a fence to his family.

Rose

Troy's long-suffering and loyal wife. She is the archetype of a mother: nurturing, caring and kind. She possesses the ability to forgive, and sees the goodness in Troy. This is shown most starkly when she takes in Raynell, Troy's illegitimate daughter, and raises her as her own. She demonstrates that she does not hold a grudge and instead acknowledges the innocence of youth. After his death, she is able to respect and mourn his passing, encouraging her family that if they had any difference with Troy, 'the time has come to put it aside.'

Jim Bono

Troy's oldest friend. He idolizes Troy. He admires Troy's capacity for hard work, and seeks to emulate it. He tentatively warns Troy off his relationship with Alberta. Seeing his friend's infidelity unfurl is crushing for Bono, and it ultimately drives them apart.

Cory

Troy and Rose's son. He is both everything that Troy is not, and yet still his father's son. He is ambitious and wants to follow his dream of becoming a footballer. He is in a position not dissimilar to that which his father was at his age, but is obstructed by Troy's actions, who projects his own failings onto his son.

After his father's death, he faces the dilemma over whether to attend the funeral, or finally say no to him. It is only after meeting Raynell, through whom he sees his father with innocent eyes again, that he is able to forgive him.

Though he has not achieved his dreams of becoming a footballer, he has made something of his life, as a corporal in the US Marines, a profession that his father would have been immensely proud of.

Lyons

Troy's son from a previous relationship. An aspiring jazz musician, he represents the laziness of youth in Troy's eyes. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Troy puts words in his son's mouth, assuming he is always looking to borrow money, even when at times he is trying to pay it back. He is doomed to repeat the mistakes of his father as he does not have the strength of Cory.

Gabriel

Troy's brother. The wise fool. He has a brain injury from the war, and believes he is the archangel Gabriel. Though his talking and songs often sounds like nonsense, he prophesies his brother's death, continually warning of the hellhounds and proclaiming that he has seen St Peter's list with Troy's name on it.

Raynell

Troy's illegitimate daughter. Though she is born out of Troy's unfaithfulness to Rose, she represents hope and the good that is left behind once her father has gone.

A word on the playwright

Twice a winner of the Pulitzer prize, (one of which was for *Fences*,) August Wilson was a poet-turned-playwright of great significance in 20th-century America.

Fences forms part of his 'Pittsburgh Cycle': ten plays about the ten decades of the 20th century (*Fences* being the 1950s).

His body of work deals with African-American experiences of the 20th century and the tensions caused by race relations.

Wilson's own father drifted in and out of his life, and the relationship between father and son is explored in *Fences*, through Troy's relationship with his own children, and that of his relationship to his violent father.

Wilson grew up in Pittsburgh, where *Fences* is set, which at that time was a place where a generation of black sharecroppers had settled, having walked north.

Social, cultural and historical context

Fences is set very deliberately at a time of change in America. It is pre-civil-rights movement. Troy carries with him the history of his father, an unsuccessful sharecropper. He has experienced his ambitions being quashed because of the colour of his skin, which has affected his belief in what his sons can achieve. His children represent the future and the hope of better opportunities for blacks in America.

It is significant that Wilson chooses to set the play in 1957, the season in which Hank Aaron, a black American baseball player, went on to lead Milwaukee to victory in the world series. This plays in direct conflict to Troy's thoughts that sports are not for the black man. Troy ironically proclaims 'Hank Aaron ain't nobody.'

The play was first published in 1986 and premiered on 30 April 1985 at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, directed by Lloyd Richards, who also wrote the foreword to the published play.

Themes

August Wilson prefaces the play with a poem:

When the sins of our fathers visit us

We do not have to play host.

We can banish them with forgiveness

As God, in His Largeness and Laws

It is clear that **fatherhood** is a major theme in the play. Specifically, it deals with father-and-son relationships in the black American community in the 1950s. Troy and Bono represent the past, in fact Troy tells stories of his tumultuous and violent relationship with his father, a failed sharecropper like many black men in the south after the abolition of slavery. Cory and Lyons represent the future generation, and much of the conflict in the play concerns the different values and world views of the father and the sons.

Troy feels fortunate to have his own home, and wishes to keep it and everything in it. He is preoccupied with this, fencing off what he has and not wishing to risk losing it. However, this proves to be hypocritical, as he is secretly sneaking off and committing adultery throughout. He imposes his beliefs explicitly on his sons, predominantly on Cory, who still lives under his roof and therefore falls under his assumed authority. Troy destroys Cory's dream of playing football, and though Cory eventually rejects his father in life, he does forgive him in death.

Another important theme is **the place of the black community in American society**, and how it is changing at the time of the play. Troy is wedded to oppression he has experienced, both in childhood through his father's struggle, and in being unable to achieve a profession as a baseball player due to the colour of his skin. His sons view their world differently, and see opportunities for black men in sports and music. Though Troy imposes these old-fashioned beliefs on his family, he is a union man at work, and even fights to become the first black man to drive the rubbish truck instead of doing the heavy lifting, as black men have previously done.

Death is another theme that Wilson explores. Troy is visited by the metaphorical figure of death throughout the play. He battles with it and abrasively confronts it, likening facing death to facing a pitched baseball. His brother Gabriel forewarns of his death; he claims to have seen Troy's name on St Peter's list, and says that when Troy is ready he will tell him to open the gates of heaven to let him in. At the conclusion of the play this is what he does.

There is also **the theme in the title: Fences**. The fence that Troy is building through the play has different symbolic meanings for the different characters. For example, Rose wants it built to keep her loved ones in. After their final argument, Troy tells Cory that he will leave his things on the other side of the fence. Bono rather prophetically says in Act 2 scene 1: 'Some people build fences to keep people out ... and other people build fences to keep people in.'

Resources

Recommended edition

Fences by August Wilson. Plume. ISBN 978-0-7352-1668-6

Further reading

Conversations with August Wilson, edited by Jackson R Bryer and Mary C. Hartig (Literary Conversations) 17 Jan 2006 ISBN-13: 978-1578068319

Understanding August Wilson, by Mary L. Bogumil (Understanding Contemporary American Literature) 30 Apr 1999 ISBN-13: 978-1570032523

Online resources

<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/27/theater/theater-family-ties-in-wilson-s-fences.html>

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-fences-august-wilson-20161215-story.html>

Useful soundtracks to use in the classroom

Sam Cooke (the song 'A change is gonna come' seems particularly poignant)

Ray Charles

Little Richard

Charlie Parker

Practical exploration activities

Actors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *Fences*. Some of the exercises may help actors to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. You might explore moments from the play that are alluded to but not seen, for example:

- when Troy runs away from his father aged 14
- Rose at the church bakesale after Raynell is born
- Cory enlisting to join the Marines
- Lyons with his musician friends
- Bono playing dominoes with his new friends
- Gabriel at Miss Pearl's.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps actors to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow the actors to consider the voice, attitude and physicality of the character they are exploring.

A more theatrical way to explore hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, following on from the examples above, after we have watched a scene play out, we could immediately interview the character and ask them probing questions to discover thoughts the actor may not have considered. For example, we could ask Rose whether she suspected her husband had been cheating on her, or why she agreed to take in Raynell as her own.

Exploring accent and dialect can also help actors to consider character choices. It would be useful to listen to YouTube clips of the Pittsburgh black accent, particularly older footage, as accents and dialects change over time, even in the same region. In *Fences*, how might Troy's accent differ from Cory's, as he spent his formative years in the south?

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? For example, you might see how different characters behave when they are alone in the yard. How does this differ, if it does, from how they behave when they are with other characters?

Key scene work / alternative viewpoints

Another useful exercise to consider involves **staging and rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus** and then trying it in an alternative style. For example, it might be useful to stage the moment in Act 2 scene 1 when Troy confesses to Rose that he has been unfaithful. The scene might play out the first time with Troy almost grovelling. This might manifest itself in their proxemics on stage, if he is downstage and Rose is higher on the steps. Then re-stage the scene to see how their positions in space change the meaning and emotions of a scene. For example, how might it change the scene if Troy tells her the news from a position that is higher in space than her?

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *Fences*. Some of the suggestions

may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised and from 'page to stage'.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting and pitch** for your student designers, as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions. Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help students to consider the text in a holistic way. For example, a group could consist of a set, costume, sound and lighting designer. Smaller groups simply take on more than one area of responsibility. It is important that each designer questions the aims and intentions of the others, so that each member of the production team is able to think in a holistic and collaborative way. The design 'pitch' could then be offered to the teacher (producer). This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas/contextualise themes and key moments, or at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the exam. TIP – each member of the production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Creating a model box of a potential set design is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each scene will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *Fences* takes place all in one place – the yard – and so the model box would potentially only need to have one configuration, though this is not set in stone, and a designer might want to change the set as the play develops in a more abstract way, for example as the fence is built.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key scenes is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea of theme. For example, the African-American jazz and blues of the 1950s: might different characters have different soundtracks? For example, Troy and Bono might be accompanied by the old songs which are rooted in their cotton-picking forefathers, like the songs Troy himself sings that he learnt from his father, whereas Cory and Lyons might have the more modern music of the time, like Sam Cooke or Charlie Parker.

How can lighting help to create shadow and suspense? Have a **look at previous productions and lighting designs** to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact. If you don't have access to lighting, you might want to consider the effect of torches or candles. (Safety first!) Again, though the play is set in one place, how might the light change the space, both literally in terms of the time of day, but also metaphorically as the tragic climax of the play approaches.

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is **sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic, representational, or more naturalistic? What is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? In this case the obvious choice is to look at clothes from the 1950s in Pittsburgh, though again, a designer might make a bold choice to do something completely at odds to this. It is interesting for designers to interview actors and discover how costume can reveal insight into characterisation and interpretation.

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