

Fremont Great Books Book Club
Discussion Questions for August Wilson's "Fences"
February 22, 2025

1. The playwright makes the case that "sons repeat the sins of their fathers." How much of Troy's bitterness comes from pain he still feels from growing up with his own father? Do you think Cory and Lyons will repeat Troy's mistakes or break the cycle? What is the significance of Troy Maxson's name?
2. Do you believe Troy when he says he doesn't want Cory to be at all like him? What does he want for his sons? Why does Troy oppose Cory playing football to get a college scholarship?
3. How did you feel when Troy admits his affair to Rose but won't promise to end the affair? Did Rose know about Troy's affair all along? Do you think this was the first time it had happened? When Rose learns of the affair, she remains in the marriage; what social, emotional or financial reasons might have made her stay?
4. What does the setting of the play suggest about the Maxson family's place in society? What evidence of Jim Crow and institutionalized racism is present within the play?
5. Looking back at his own time in the US Army, Wilson said "Anyone who goes into the army and makes a career out of it is a loser. They sit there and are nurtured by the army and don't have to confront life." How does Gabriel show the effect of military service on African Americans who served in World War II? Why do you think Wilson has Corey join the Marines towards the end of the play?
6. Are the fences in the play meant to keep people out, keep people in, or even to represent the limitations some people face in the world? What invisible, but powerful, fences created the circumstances for the Maxson family in this play? Are any of the fences positive?
7. Who is the protagonist in the play, and what does he/she want most? How did your feelings about Troy change during the play?
8. "Fences" is filled with music, whether sung, played on an instrument, or mentioned in conversation. What is the purpose of music in the play? Did you pick up on Wilson's intended "Blues aesthetic?" Specifically, what is the meaning of the song about "Old Blue," which was intertwined with the story of Troy's father?
9. By the end of Fences, every character except Raynell is institutionalized – Rose in the church, Lyons in the penitentiary, Gabriel in the mental hospital, and Cory in the U.S. Marines. The only free person is Raynell, Troy's daughter. What might the institutionalization of Troy's family members represent? What might be represented by the fact that Raynell is the sole remaining Maxson to exist outside of an institution?
10. Wilson was inspired by Joseph Campbell's writings to create a mythology for Black people that he believed was missing. Wilson's mythology was supported by 10 plays representing each decade of the 20th Century, all set in Pittsburgh except "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," which is set in Chicago. Did you get a sense of this mythology in "Fences?" If Wilson had lived past 2005, what might the next two decades' plays be about?

LINKS & RESOURCES

Ford's Theatre Discussion/Essay Questions: <https://fords-theatre.s3.amazonaws.com/files/resources/fences-discussion-questions-2.pdf>

American Players Theatre Study Guide: <https://americanplayers.org/assets/documents/2019-Fences-Study-Guide.pdf>

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Leon County Schools Essay Topics:

<https://www.leonschools.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=52353&dataid=60355&FileName=essay%20topics%20for%20fences.docx>

New Stage Theatre's Study Guide: <https://newstagetheatre.com/manage/wp-content/uploads/New-Stage-Fences-Study-Guide.pdf>

"August Wilson: A Life" by Patti Hartigan