

# Fences research

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The Impact of Physical and Psychological Boundaries in August Wilson's *Fences*

The early 1950's was a time of enormous importance because of the Civil Rights Movement which emphasized equal rights for blacks and whites. According to the book *Approaching Literature*, this time period became very familiar to August Wilson, the author of the play *Fences*. Wilson, an African American man, was raised by his mother and his ex-convict father. For a short period of time, before moving back to his old neighborhood, Wilson lived in a primarily white neighborhood where he experienced the feeling of being on the "outside". When he was in the ninth grade he had a teacher that believed there was no way he could have written an intelligent, twenty page research paper on Napoleon Bonaparte, so she accused him of plagiarism. This incident pushed Wilson to drop out of high school and teach himself. From that point on, he began educating himself by reading through the section of black authors in the local library. Wilson had strong views and opinions about the rights of African Americans.

So much so, that he wrote quite a few plays concerning this major part of history. (1024) In Wilson's play, *Fences*, how does he use psychological and physical boundaries to show the emotional separations between his characters? Baseball becomes the most prominent image in Wilson's play. Troy Maxson, the protagonist of the play, spent many years learning and playing this game. Sheri Metzger, the author of *An Essay on Fences*, believes that "Baseball defines Troy Maxson's life and provides the measure of his success. (1) As we already know, in his prime, Troy was a great baseball player and he strongly believed that he was not given the opportunity to play in the major leagues because of the color of his skin. He constantly

compared himself to the ball players that made it to the major leagues, such as Hank Aaron, saying “ I can hit forty-three home runs right now” (1048) This not only represents the fence that restricts the achievements of blacks and their constant struggle in a white society, but also Troy’s psychological boundaries between himself and mainstream America.

On a first analysis of the physical boundary that exists between father and son, Troy and Cory, we must look at their relationship. Their bond was typical of any teenage boy and his father; they generally got along. The boundary comes up in the play when Cory asks Troy to sign the papers that would allow him to go to college on a football scholarship. But when Troy refuses, claiming that “ the colored guy got to be twice as good [as the white player] before he get on the team,” (1047) the boundary becomes very real.

He also notes that even if they do let black players on the team, “ They sit on the bench and don’t get used. ” (1047) Troy is still so angry over what he sees as his own lost opportunities with baseball and the injustice of it all that he can’t take any pleasure in the fact that his own son is getting a once in a lifetime opportunity to play football in college, for free! He is still stuck in the past where he was refused a chance to play professional baseball. He is bitter because deep down he is afraid that his son will go on to be more successful than he ever was.

The scene where Cory comes at his father with a baseball bat illustrates quite a different image of the traditional father-and-son backyard baseball game we see in movies or books. This shows the huge gap in their relationship and Troy’s need for control. According to Gerald Weales, the author of Review of Fences in the Commonwealth, “ Troy not signing the

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papers for Cory was a destructive act that lead to this final confrontation between the two. " (1) Troy feels the need to confine Cory within his authority, but Cory hates being stuck behind the fences his father has put up; so he escapes, leaving hisfamilybehind.

Yet, when Cory returns, we find that in his attempt to free himself he has become bound within the confines of a far more strict institution; the Marine Corps. Metzger argues that " Cory finally escaped his father's authority, just to be placed under the authority of people far more strict and controlling. " (3) Another physical boundary exists between husband and wife, Troy and Rose. At the beginning of the play, Troy is building a fence for Rose although he sees absolutely no use for it.

Because she's so focused on keeping all the people she loves safe and inside its walls, Rose is completely unaware that the fence is actually pushing her loved ones away. Since spending time in prison, Troy views fences as restrictions or limitations, so he is in no hurry to build Rose's fence. But as the play goes on we see that after eighteen years of marriage, Troy feels confined by theresponsibilityandloyaltythat come with it and needs to break out of those constraints. He wants so badly to be free from the ties of marriage that he has an affair with another woman, Alberta.

Although, in his mind he broke free of those marital boundaries, realistically, he just put up yet another fence. Rose later finds out about this affair and then Troy tells her that Alberta died while giving birth to their daughter, Raynell. Troy, being the thoughtless man he is, begs Rose to take care of his illegitimate daughter. And Rose, being the kind woman she is, agrees to raise the child because she knows that Raynell is an innocent child who was

simply born into a bad situation. Rose tells Troy, “ Raynell will have a mother, but he will be a womanless man for the rest of his life. (1071) Later, after Alberta’s death, Troy finally completes the fence. But rather than finishing it for Rose, as originally intended, he does it for his own reasons of keeping out danger and death. Meanwhile, Rose is still trapped with the responsibilities and pressures that life brings. But towards the end of the play we see that she escapes Troy’s fence, only to exchange it for one established by the church. According to Metzger, “ Religion provides its own fences and restraints, and for Rose, who decided to stay with Troy, the church offers a haven within its institutionalized walls. (1040) Rose willingly puts herself behind a fence that is a little more bearable, saying, “ Jesus builds a fence around me every day. ” (1040) There are also some psychological fences in this play that Troy has absolutely no control over. The mental hospital where Troy confines Gabriel offers one example of that kind of fence. Gabe, who suffered permanent brain damage as a result of injuries he received while serving in World War II, now thinks of himself as an angel. Although Troy views this fence as something that’s irritating and in his way, Gabe, unaware of all of this, continues on in his childlike innocence.

Troy has a guilty conscience because he institutionalized Gabe and then used his disability money to pay for the house that he now lives in. This incident further breaks down the relationship between Troy and Cory because when he finds out what his father has done, Cory treats him with open disrespect and tells him that he no longer counts. Once again, we see that Gabe simply isn’t aware of these things, therefore he’s unaffected by

these events that dramatically change the others' lives. Gabe's persistence shows hope for the future. According to Joseph H.

Wressling, the author of Wilson's *Fences*, " Gabe, just like Rose, illustrates unconditional love. " (3) Now that Cory and Troy's relationship has no chance of any reconciliation, Cory leaves and Troy loses any hope of ever seeing his son again before he dies. Cory doesn't return again until the day of his father's funeral when he finally meets his sister, Raynell. Cory, still remembering the broken relationship with his father, did not want to attend the funeral. But Rose convinced him to go and pay his respects to his father because he never meant any harm. Troy had always said that he had given his children everything he could.

Cory didn't always agree with his father, but he overcame that and broke down a barrier and finally forgave his father. Before the funeral Troy's simpleminded brother Gabe, with his trumpet, came to blow open the gates of Heaven for Troy's arrival. His attempts at blowing his trumpet failed because there was no mouthpiece on it. But Gabe, in his childlike innocence improvises. He begins to dance about and sing to the Heavens for his brother. Finished with his dance and satisfied that the gates of Heaven are open and ready for Troy, Gabe says, " That's the way that go! " (1083).

Wilson uses many of his characters and their relationships to show their physical and psychological separations between each other and the world. By the end of *Fences*, all of Wilson's characters are bound by a fence of some sort. Although Raynell stands behind the fence that her father finally finished, she is expected to go far beyond that boundary and strive for a better future than her father and everyone else. She shows that there is

hope for the future. Works Cited 1. Metzger, Sheri. "An essay on Fences." Drama for Students. Detroit: Gale. From Literature Resource Center. Web. 9 Nov. 2010. 2. Schakel, Peter J. and Jack Ridl. "August Wilson's Fences - A Form in Depth." Approaching Literature: Writing Reading Thinking. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. 1024-083. Print. 3. Weales, Gerald. "Review of Fences in the Commonwealth, Volume CXIV, no. 10, May 22, 1987, pp. 320-21." Drama for Students. Ed. David M. Galens. Vol. 3. Detroit: Gale, 1998. From Literature Resource Center. Web. 9 Nov. 2010. 4. Wessling, Joseph H. "Wilson's Fences." Explicator 57. 2 (Winter 1999): 123-127. Rpt. In Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 222. Detroit: Gale, 2006. From Literature Resource Center. Web. 9 Nov. 2010.