**Fences Reading Guide**

**Title**: Fences

**Author**: August Wilson

**Setting**: 1950s, primarily in the backyard of the Maxson family's house in a lower-middle-class African American neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

**Summary**: August Wilson’s drama *Fences* is a Pulitzer-prize winning work and part of a series of plays collectively referred to as the Pittsburgh Cycle. All but one of these plays (*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*) are set in Pittsburgh’s Hill District, where Wilson grew up. Each play in the cycle is set in a different decade of the twentieth century, and each focuses on the Black experience in the Northeast and how the social and historical climate affected the people who lived there. *Fences* is set in the 1950s and focuses on the experience and concerns of Troy Maxson, a garbage collector and wannabe baseball player who rails against the obstacles in his life that burden him and keep him from achieving his dreams.

**Major Characters:**

1. **Troy Maxson**: Troy is the protagonist of the play, a former baseball player who now works as a garbage collector. He is a complex character, filled with pride, bitterness, and a deep sense of responsibility. His experiences with racial discrimination have left him embittered, and he struggles with his roles as a father, husband, and friend.
2. **Rose Maxson**: Rose is Troy's wife, a devoted and strong woman who strives to keep her family together. She is nurturing and supportive but also reveals her strength and independence as she deals with Troy's infidelities and the challenges within their marriage.
3. **Cory Maxson**: Cory is Troy and Rose's teenage son, who aspires to play college football. He represents the new generation with hopes and dreams that contrast sharply with Troy's more jaded worldview. Cory's relationship with his father is fraught with tension and conflict.
4. **Gabriel Maxson**: Gabriel is Troy's brother, who suffered a head injury in World War II that left him mentally impaired. He believes he is the Archangel Gabriel and serves as a symbol of innocence and spiritual insight within the play.
5. **Jim Bono**: Bono is Troy's best friend and fellow garbage collector. He serves as a confidant to Troy and provides a contrasting perspective on Troy's actions and decisions. Bono is loyal and offers wisdom and advice throughout the play.
6. **Lyons Maxson**: Lyons is Troy's son from a previous relationship. He is a musician who often borrows money from Troy. Lyons represents a different path in life, one that is more artistic and less constrained by the expectations Troy places on Cory.
7. **Raynell Maxson**: Raynell is Troy's daughter with his mistress, Alberta. After Alberta's death, Rose takes Raynell in and raises her as her own. Raynell symbolizes hope and the possibility of a new beginning for the family.

**Themes:**

* **Race and Discrimination**: The play explores the impact of systemic racism on the lives and aspirations of African Americans. Troy's experiences with racial discrimination shape his worldview and influence his relationships with his family.
* **Family and Duty**: The theme of family is central to the play, examining the responsibilities and obligations that come with familial relationships. Troy's sense of duty often conflicts with his personal desires and aspirations.
* **Dreams and Aspirations**: The characters in the play have dreams and aspirations that are often thwarted by societal limitations and personal choices. Troy's failed baseball career and Cory's football ambitions highlight the generational differences in pursuing dreams.
* **Forgiveness and Redemption**: The theme of forgiveness runs throughout the play, particularly in the relationships between Troy and his family members. The characters struggle with forgiving past wrongs and finding redemption.
* **Death and Mortality**: Death is a recurring motif in the play, symbolized by Troy's frequent confrontations with Death as a character. The play examines how the characters deal with mortality and the legacy they leave behind.

**Review Questions**: Answering the following questions will increase your comprehension of the play. Respond to these questions by writing the answers in your notebook. *Some of the questions require you to express an opinion or describe your reaction to events in the play. In these instances, there is no right or wrong answer, and your responses will vary.* The answers to factual questions are included in this reading guide.

**Act I**

**Scene I:**

1. Identify clues in the text that describe the setting of the play. How does the setting of the yard, where much of the action takes place, contribute to the themes of the play? Consider the symbolism of the yard and what it represents for Troy and his family. How do you think a different setting would have impacted the play?
2. How do Troy's complaints about racial discrimination at work reflect the broader societal issues of the 1950s in America? How do you think Troy’s experience might have been different if the play was set in society today? How might the author’s own experiences and the historical context of the Civil Rights Movement have influenced this aspect of the story?
3. Describe the relationship that Troy and Bono have. How would you describe their relationship to someone that had not read this play? Include your explanation along with at least one quote that supports your thinking.
4. Describe the relationship that Troy and Lyon have. How would you describe their relationship to someone that had not read this play? What do you think Troy thinks of his son? Include your explanation along with at least one quote that supports your thinking.
5. Pick one quote from this scene that you think captures Rose’s motivations and actions in this scene. Include your quote along with both your explanation for selecting it and discuss the role of her character in the play.
6. Why do you think the author had Troy tell the story about Death and the Devil? What do you think the author was trying to convey? Explain your thinking.

**Scene II:**

1. Based on Troy's line "Everybody think they gonna fire me. I ain't worried about them firing me," (page 23) do you think Troy will lose his job? Why or why not? Support your prediction.
2. What do you think the fence symbolizes for Rose? What else do you think it might symbolize? Explain your thinking.
3. Describe Gabriel to someone that has not read this play. Include your description along with at least one quote that supports your thinking.
4. How do you think Troy feels about having a house due to the payment Gabriel received from the government? How can you tell? Do you think his feelings are warranted? Explain your thinking.
5. What are the different attitudes Rose and Troy have about the lottery? What do those attitudes imply about their characters? Which one do you agree with more? Explain your thinking.
6. What does Gabriel's character represent in the historical context of the play? How do you think his mental state and experiences in World War II might reflect the struggles many Black soldiers faced upon returning home?

**Scene III:**

1. Describe the relationship that Troy and Cory have. How would you describe their relationship to someone that had not read this play? What do you think Troy thinks of his son? Include your explanation along with at least one quote that supports your thinking.
2. How does the dialogue between Troy and Cory about Cory's job and playing football reveal their contrasting perspectives on responsibility, ambition, and opportunity? Which perspective do you agree with more? Explain your thinking.
3. Troy references the Negro Leagues and racial discrimination in professional baseball. Watch this [linked video about the Negro Baseball Leagues](https://mass.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/negro-baseball-leagues-video/making-black-america-through-the-grapevine/) to learn more. Why do you think the author included this reference? How might this historical context have impacted the author’s portrayal of Troy's perspectives?
4. What does Troy think being a father entails? Do you think he considers himself to be a good father? Do you think Cory thinks Troy is a good father? Include at least one quote to support your thinking.
5. Based on what you have learned about Troy, are you surprised by his reaction to Cory wanting to play college football? Include your explanation along with at least one quote that supports your thinking.
6. Find a quote that you think exemplifies the hopes and fears that Troy has for Cory. Include your quote along with an explanation of why you picked it and how you think it contributes to Troy’s character development within the play.

**Scene IV:**

1. How does Troy's retelling of his childhood and relationship with his father reveal the historical context Black men like Troy faced growing up? How do you think those experiences may or may not have shaped Troy as an adult? Explain your thinking.
2. Compare and contrast Troy as a father to Troy’s father. How are they similar and different? How do you think Troy would describe his father? How do you think Troy would describe himself as a father? Include your explanation along with at least one quote that supports your thinking.
3. Does the outcome of Troy’s complaint surprise you? How does he feel about the outcome? Explain your thinking and include examples from the text.
4. Select a stage direction from this scene that you think was particularly impactful in conveying the message intended by the author. Include the stage direction, why you selected it, how you think it helped develop the scene, along what you think the author was trying to convey.
5. Find a quote that you think exemplifies Troy’s values and priorities. Include your quote along with an explanation of why you picked it and how you think it contributes to Troy’s character development within the play.
6. How does Troy feel about each of his son’s and how are their relationships different? Explain your thinking and include examples from the text.

**Act II**

**Scene I:**

1. Reread this quote from Bono, “Some people build fences to keep people out … and other people build fences to keep people in” (page 61). Discuss the significance of this quote within the context of the relationship between Troy and Rose as well as the context of the play. Hypothesize how this sentiment might have inspired the title of the play. What do you think the author was trying to convey? Explain your thinking.
2. Reflect on Troy's statement, "As long as it sets right in my heart . . . then I'm okay" (page 63). How does this philosophy guide his actions, and do you agree with it? Why or why not?
3. Discuss how the dialogue between Troy and Bono reveals their contrasting perspectives on responsibility and loyalty. What do you think the author is trying to convey by including this conversation in the play?
4. Consider the moment when Rose says, "I done tried to be everything a wife should be" (page 67). How does this reflect the societal expectations of women during the 1950s? Do you think these expectations have changed today? Explain your reasoning.
5. Predict how Cory's relationship with his father might evolve after the confrontation in this scene. How do you think Cory's actions will affect his future? Explain your thinking.
6. Pick one quote that you think exemplifies a key theme of this scene. Include the quote, why you selected it, along with the theme it exemplifies.

**Scene II:**

1. What is your interpretation of the institutionalization papers signed by Troy? Do you think he knew what he was signing? What do you think his motivations were for signing the papers? Explain your thinking.
2. What does Rose think of Troy in this scene? How can you tell? Do you agree with her perspective? Include at least one quote to support your thinking.
3. Reflect on Troy's statement, "Just give me some space. That's all. Just give me some room to breathe" (page 77). How does this request for space impact his relationships with his family? Do you think it's a reasonable request? Why or why not?
4. In the scene, Troy personifies Death by addressing it directly. Why do you think the author chose to personify Death? What does this reveal about Troy's internal struggles and his need to confront mortality?
5. Predict how Troy's relationship with Rose might evolve after the revelation of Alberta's death and the birth of his child. How do you think this event will impact their future interactions?

**Scene III:**

1. When Troy is alone on the porch with the baby, he sings a lullaby and admits, "But sometimes he's scared. And right now your daddy's scared cause we sitting out here and ain't got no home" (page 79). How does this moment of vulnerability contrast with your understanding of Troy's usual demeanor? What does this reveal about his character and his current emotional state? Does this scene surprise you based on what you know about Troy? Explain your thinking.
2. Predict how Rose's decision to take care of the baby will impact her relationship with Troy and the rest of the family. What does this decision reveal about her character?
3. How does this scene explore the theme of family and duty? Consider both Troy's and Rose's perspectives in your response.
4. Both Troy and Raynell have been motherless. How do you think this shared experience might shape their characters and their relationship? How might Troy’s past influence his approach to raising Raynell?

**Scene IV:**

1. Pick one quote from the scene that you think best exemplifies Cory's feelings towards Troy. Include that quote and explain what it reveals about Cory's character and his perspective on their relationship.
2. How has the relationship between Bono and Troy changed since the beginning of the play? What do you think has contributed to that change? Include at least one quote to support your thinking.
3. Lyons advises Cory to talk to Troy about finding a job, saying, "Talk to Papa ... he know some people. He’ll be able to help get you a job" (page 81). Considering the tension between Cory and Troy, do you think this is good advice? Why or why not? How does this advice reflect Lyons' own experiences and perspective?
4. Select a stage direction from this scene that you think was particularly impactful in conveying the message intended by the author. Include the stage direction, why you selected it, how you think it helped develop the scene, along what you think the author was trying to convey.
5. Rose tells Troy, "Ain't no use in you studying me. It don't matter what time I come back" (page 82). What does this statement reveal about her feelings toward Troy and their relationship at this point in the play? How does this dialogue contribute to your understanding of Rose's character? Explain your thinking.
6. Pick one quote that you think exemplifies a key theme of this scene. Include the quote, why you selected it, along with the theme it exemplifies.

**Scene V:**

1. There is a notable time gap between Scene 4 and 5 in this Act, which jumps from the confrontation between Troy and Cory to the morning of Troy's funeral several years later. How does this time gap affect your understanding of the characters and their development? Reflect on why the author might have chosen to include this time gap and restart the play at Troy's funeral. What impact does this narrative decision have on the story's themes and your perception of the characters?
2. Cory talks about feeling overshadowed by his father throughout his life. How do you think individuals can find their own identity while dealing with the legacies of their parents or guardians?
3. How does Rose’s monologue about her life with Troy impact your understanding of her character? What does this speech reveal about her sacrifices and her perception of her marriage?
4. Analyze the dialogue between Cory and Rose. How do you think their conversation reveals the complexities of their relationship and their individual perspectives on Troy? Use specific quotes to support your analysis.
5. Gabriel's final scene is both poignant and symbolic. What do you think Gabriel's dance and his attempt to blow the trumpet signify in the context of the play's conclusion? How does this moment contribute to the overall message of the play?
6. The author uses symbolism in this scene and throughout the play to communicate deeper meanings. Find an example of symbolism that sticks out to you from this scene or the play. Include it here along with your reasons for selecting it. Do you feel like it was an effective symbol? Explain your thinking.

**Answers to Review Questions:**

**Act I**

**Scene I:**

1. \*Answers will vary
2. \*Answers will vary
3. \*Answers will vary
4. \*Answers will vary
5. \*Answers will vary
6. \*Answers will vary

**Scene II:**

1. \*Answers will vary
2. \*Answers will vary
3. \*Answers will vary
4. \*Answers will vary
5. \*Answers will vary
6. \*Answers will vary

**Scene III:**

1. \*Answers will vary
2. \*Answers will vary
3. \*Answers will vary
4. \*Answers will vary
5. \*Answers will vary
6. \*Answers will vary

**Scene IV:**

1. \*Answers will vary
2. \*Answers will vary
3. \*Answers will vary
4. \*Answers will vary
5. \*Answers will vary
6. Troy has a strained relationship with both of his sons, but for different reasons. He is hard on Cory, feeling threatened by his potential success in football, which leads to conflict and resentment, as seen when he tells Cory he can't play anymore. With Lyons, Troy is more dismissive, viewing him as irresponsible and dependent, which is evident when he begrudgingly accepts Lyons' repayment of borrowed money.

**Act II**

**Scene I:**

1. \*Answers will vary
2. \*Answers will vary
3. \*Answers will vary
4. \*Answers will vary
5. \*Answers will vary
6. \*Answers will vary

**Scene II:**

1. \*Answers will vary
2. \*Answers will vary
3. \*Answers will vary
4. \*Answers will vary
5. \*Answers will vary

**Scene III:**

1. \*Answers will vary
2. \*Answers will vary
3. This scene explores the theme of family and duty by highlighting the different ways Troy and Rose respond to their responsibilities. Troy acknowledges his duty to his new daughter, asking Rose for help despite his past mistakes, showing his desire to fulfill his role as a father. Rose, on the other hand, agrees to care for the baby out of compassion and a sense of duty, but makes it clear that Troy's betrayal has left him without her support as a wife, emphasizing her own boundaries within the family.
4. \*Answers will vary

**Scene IV:**

1. \*Answers will vary
2. \*Answers will vary
3. \*Answers will vary
4. \*Answers will vary
5. \*Answers will vary
6. \*Answers will vary

**Scene V:**

1. \*Answers will vary
2. \*Answers will vary
3. \*Answers will vary
4. \*Answers will vary
5. \*Answers will vary
6. \*Answers will vary