AUGUST WILSON'S
FENCES

STUDY GUIDE

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TRICAR
WHO’S WHO?

CAST

PETER N. BAILEY     GABRIEL
CHRISTOPHER BAUTISTA    LYONS
DYLAN HOUGH     RAYNELL
NGABO NABEA     CORY
E.B. SMITH     JIM BONO
ORDENA STEPHENS-THOMPSON   ROSE
NIGEL SHAWN WILLIAMS     TROY

CREATIVE

DJANET SEARS     DIRECTOR
ASTRID JANSON     SET DESIGNER
RACHEL FORBES     COSTUME DESIGNER
JASON HAND     LIGHTING DESIGNER
VERNE GOOD     SOUND DESIGNER
BEATRICE CAMPBELL     STAGE MANAGER
SUZANNE MCAFARHUR     ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
TARYN DOUGALL     APPRENTICE STAGE MANAGER
August Wilson (April 27, 1945 – October 2, 2005) authored *Gem of the Ocean, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, The Piano Lesson, Seven Guitars, Fences, Two Trains Running, Jitney, King Hedley II*, and *Radio Golf*. These works explore the heritage and experience of African-Americans, decade-by-decade, over the course of the twentieth century. His plays have been produced at regional theaters across the country and all over the world, as well as on Broadway. In 2003, Mr. Wilson made his professional stage debut in his one-man show, *How I Learned What I Learned*. Mr. Wilson’s works garnered many awards including Pulitzer Prizes for *Fences* (1987); and for *The Piano Lesson* (1990); a Tony Award for *Fences*; Great Britain’s Oliver Award for *Jitney*; as well as eight New York Drama Critics Circle Awards for *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Fences, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, The Piano Lesson, Two Trains Running, Seven Guitars, Jitney, and Radio Golf*. Additionally, the cast recording of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* received a 1985 Grammy Award, and Mr. Wilson received a 1995 Emmy Award nomination for his screenplay adaptation of *The Piano Lesson*. Mr. Wilson’s early works included the one-act plays *The Janitor, Recycle, The Coldest Day of the Year, Malcolm X, The Homecoming* and the musical satire *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*.

Mr. Wilson received many fellowships and awards, including Rockefeller and Guggenheim Fellowships in Playwrighting, the Whiting Writers Award, 2003 Heinz Award, was awarded a 1999 National Humanities Medal by the President of the United States, and received numerous honorary degrees from colleges and universities, as well as the only high school diploma ever issued by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. He was an alumnus of New Dramatists, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a 1995 inductee into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and on October 16, 2005, Broadway renamed the theater located at 245 West 52nd Street – the August Wilson Theatre. Additionally, Mr. Wilson was posthumously inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame in 2007.

Mr. Wilson was born and raised in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and lived in Seattle, Washington at the time of his death. He is immediately survived by his two daughters, Sakina Ansari and Azula Carmen Wilson, and his wife, costume designer Constanza Romero.
August Wilson was born in April 1945, the son of Daisy Wilson, an African-American cleaner, and Frederick August Kittel Sr, a baker of German descent. His given name was Frederick August Kittel Jr., but he took the name August Wilson—adopting his mother’s surname—after his father was absent for most of his childhood. Wilson was brought up in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a historically African-American neighbourhood where Wilson observed the ways that economics and race intersect in the daily lives of those around him.

The Hill District—originally nicknamed “Little Haiti”—was Pittsburgh’s first Black neighbourhood and it was once the heart of Black culture and art in the city. Many migrated to the area in the early 1900s, and while the population increased rapidly, housing was in short supply due to segregation laws that prevented African Americans from residing anywhere outside the Hill District. Despite cramped conditions, the area blossomed creatively, becoming a hub for jazz music in particular. It is this rich cultural environment that Wilson highlights in many of his plays. However, in the 1950s, the U.S. government planned to redevelop much of the aging housing in the Hill District. This urban renewal plan saw many of the neighbourhood’s residents displaced from their homes, isolated the area from neighbouring communities, and ultimately led to the Hill District’s economic decline. This history is central to many of the later plays in Wilson’s American Century Cycle.
Wilson and his family did not stay in the Hill District: when his mother remarried in the 1950s, the family moved to a predominantly white working class neighbourhood, where they experienced racism, vandalism, and abuse. At 15, Wilson dropped out of school, and instead educated himself at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh by reading the works of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, and others. In 1965, Wilson left his mother’s home, moved in with a group of young Black artists and intellectuals, began his work as a writer, and was exposed to Malcolm X’s speeches and the Black Power movement. These experiences fundamentally influenced Wilson’s political and artistic perspective. In 1968, Wilson began to explore working in theatre, and along with Rob Penny, he returned to his childhood neighbourhood to found the Black Horizon Theater in the Hill District. He served as the theatre’s Company Director, with Penny serving as playwright-in-residence.

Wilson’s cultural impact cannot be understated. He made it his project to chronicle the African American experience throughout the 20th century, and the plays that resulted are some of the finest works of contemporary theatre. His plays emphasize the way that land and space inspires art, and it is no surprise that he chose the rich soil of the Hill District as the setting for many of his works. Wilson’s impact was deeply felt: his childhood home in Pittsburgh—1727 Bedford Avenue—became a site of pilgrimage, and is now a historic landmark dedicated to him. Currently, there are plans in place to restore the building and transform it into a community gathering space, housing artist studios and exhibits dedicated to celebrating and continuing Wilson’s important work of telling the stories of the African diaspora in the United States.
THE AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

The American Century Cycle consists of ten plays written by August Wilson, each set in a different decade of the 20th century. Wilson uses the centurial scope of this collection of plays to explore African-American experiences across time, and documenting the country’s shifting social landscapes.

**Gem of the Ocean**
Premiere: 2003; Setting: 1900s
Aunt Ester, a 285 year old woman, is visited by Citizen Barlow, who arrives in spiritual turmoil, wishing to hear the wise woman’s tales in order to have his soul cleansed. She sets him on a journey to the mystical City of Bones at the centre of the Atlantic Ocean, where he strives for self-discovery and redemption.

**Joe Turner’s Come and Gone**
Premiere: 1988; Setting: 1910s
The cycle’s second installment is set in a Pittsburgh boarding house, which is inhabited by a variety of people who have migrated from the South to the Northern states. Separated from the lives they once knew, each character explores how to stay connected to their histories while forging new identities in new homes, and ultimately, beginning to live again.

**Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom**
Premiere: 1984; Setting: 1920s
A routine recording session becomes anything but in this play about Chicago, the blues, and seismic changes in American culture. While Ma Rainey’s blues band waits for her to arrive, tensions rise as they discuss the prejudices and obstacles they face as African Americans in the U.S. Perspectives on politics and experiences with racism are shared as the four musicians confront the aspirations and disappointments of their changing world.

**The Piano Lesson**
Premiere: 1990; Setting: 1930s
In Pittsburgh, a family argues about what to do with an inherited piano: should they keep it or sell it? Once traded by the family’s white master in exchange for two of the family’s ancestors, the piano is a ghost of their past. As siblings struggle to decide what to do, they grapple with the weight of family legacy, and endeavour to find hope in a new future.

**Seven Guitars**
Premiere: 1995; Setting: 1940s
A group of friends gathers for the funeral of blues guitarist Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton, a local musician on the brink of success. Bookended by the funeral, the play travels through the friends’ reminiscences, flashing back through Floyd’s life to explore the path that ultimately led him to his death, uncovering the obstacles they all face, and the dreams they all share.
*Fences*
Premiere: 1987; Setting: 1950s
This play follows Troy Maxson—a former baseball star turned garbage collector—as he fights to make a living, and grapple with the disappointments of his unachieved dreams. But now, at the middle of the 20th century, circumstances are beginning to change, giving Troy’s son Cory opportunities he never could’ve imagined; but, in this unfamiliar new world, Troy finds himself putting up fences, sealing himself off from a world—and a family—which he does not understand.

*Two Trains Running*
Premiere: 1991; Setting: 1960s
It’s 1969: there’s a new President in the White House, it’s a critical time for the Civil Rights Movement, and racial tensions are high. Against this backdrop, Memphis Lee must decide what to do about his restaurant, which is slated to be torn down as gentrification eats away at the neighbourhood he once knew. This play explores the intersections between race politics and increasing urbanization in Pittsburgh.

*Jitney*
Premiere: 1982; Setting: 1970s
Five jitney cab drivers struggle to survive as their city begins pushing businesses out of the neighbourhood. Facing an uncertain future in turbulent times, these characters negotiate their nostalgic relationships to the past as the city threatens to close their business in the name of “urban renewal.”

*King Hedley II*
Premiere: 1999; Setting: 1980s
King is an ex-con who has recently been released from prison, and is attempting to rebuild his life. This play plunges into the economics, violence, and racial tensions of Reagan-era Pittsburgh, where King’s hopes and dreams collide with the realities of life in 1980s America.

*Radio Golf*
Premiere: 2005; Setting: 1990s
The final play in the cycle follows a man named Harmond Wilks, who is determined to revive his childhood neighbourhood through a real estate development project, and in so doing, become Pittsburgh’s first Black mayor. However, to do so, Wilks must grapple with the neighbourhood’s history, as well as his own.
“Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. They swelled its belly until it burst into a thousand furnaces and sewing machines, a thousand butcher shops and bakers’ ovens, a thousand churches and hospitals and funeral parlors and money-lenders. The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true.

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation. They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tar-paper. They collected rags and wood. They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies. They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream. That they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon.

By 1957, the hard-won victories of the European immigrant had solidified the industrial might of America. War had been confronted and won with new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel. Life was rich, full, and flourishing. The Milwaukee Braves won the World Series, and the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow full.”
What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes, 1951

Excerpted from the celebrated Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes’ poetic suite Montage of a Dream Deferred, this poem not only implicitly critiques African American life, it raises questions about the consequences of withholding equal opportunity from an entire group of people. It is also the epigraph to Lorraine Hansberry’s ground breaking play A Raisin in the Sun. Published in 1959, A Raisin in the Sun was the first commercially successful play by an African American playwright, despite a long list of Black playwrights that came before. Written nearly 30 years later, Fences by August Wilson is arguably the second most commercially successful African American play.

A Raisin in the Sun and Fences share similar themes. Both are set in the same era. Both examine the experiences of a family who are the progeny of Africans abducted to the Americas, and enslaved for 400 years. Both plays also use an epigraph to alert the reader to the more significant ideas, and influences in the work. However, the epigraph to Fences is a poem written by August Wilson himself. In preparing the reader for this particular story, set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh in 1957, about Troy Maxson, his wife Rose, his children, his brother Gabriel and his best friend Jim, Wilson writes:

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.

August Wilson Epigraph: Fences, 1987
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

JIM CROW LAWS

In December 1865, slavery was formally abolished in the United States. What followed was a 12 year period, from 1865 to 1877, known as the Reconstruction period, where Federal law regulated the treatment of African Americans in the South, providing civil rights protections. In 1877, control of the government was taken over by white Democrats, and federal troops were withdrawn.

Discriminatory laws began with vote suppression—while there were African Americans in public office into the 1880s, the Democrats passed laws that limited their voting rights, and made voter registration more restrictive. As a result, Black voter participation decreased. Between 1890 and 1910, most of the formerly Confederate states passed laws that disenfranchised Black and poor white populations, by requiring voters pass a series of literacy, tax, and comprehension tests —naturally, for those who hadn’t the privilege of accessing education throughout their childhood, these tests posed an incredible challenge.

A series of other laws came into effect during this post-Reconstruction period: in 1890, Louisiana voted to prevent Black people from riding in the same carriage as white people on railroads. When the law was challenged, the higher courts upheld it, stating that public spaces could lawfully operate as “separate but equal,” a motto that would come to define this era’s justification of discriminatory policies.

Once a few restrictive laws had been passed in the 1880s and 90s, segregation of and discrimination towards African Americans was effectively legally permitted. Schools, hospitals, restaurants, phone booths, parks—the use of any number of public spaces was restricted to one race or another. Other practices clearly betrayed the racial anxieties and fear that existed in the background of these laws: for example, in North Carolina, Black and white schools couldn’t use the same textbooks, and in Florida, the textbooks even had to be stored separately. In Atlanta, Georgia, courtrooms kept one Bible for white witnesses to be sworn in on, and another for Black witnesses. Some cities had “restrictive covenants” in place, which segregated neighbourhoods and made Black families ineligible to live in certain neighbourhoods. All together, these policies embodied a desire to exclude African Americans from all aspects of public society.

For many years, there had been calls for the end of these discriminatory laws, with many key moments that moved the civil rights mission forward. On such flashpoint occurred in 1955 when Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her seat on the bus—it was not the first instance of such defiance, but it became the central event to push the civil rights movement into the public eye. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act, and while this certainly did not mark the end of racism, discrimination and white supremacy in America, the law was significant from a legal standpoint, as it outlawed many forms of racial discrimination. It was followed by the Voting Rights Act in 1965, which made illegal any barriers to voting in all elections.
THE GREAT MIGRATION

In the midst of World War One, the U.S. experienced a labour shortage—particularly in factories in the Northern states. During this time, the majority of African Americans were living in Southern states, where restrictive Jim Crow laws and prevailing racism were making life incredibly difficult for many.

During WW1, Northern manufacturers began sending recruiters to the South specifically to convince African Americans to move up North and work in the factories. In many cases, these labourers are being used to break strikes. Believing that conditions will be more equitable and that wages will be higher in the North, enormous numbers of African Americans begin pouring out of the southern states and moving to cities like New York, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Chicago. Between 1910 and 1970, over 6.5 million people have made the move north.

While many found expanded freedoms in their new homes—for example, they could ride public transportation, and had greater voting privileges—their lives were still relatively constrained. African Americans were often the last to be hired and the first fired in any job that a white person might be willing to take. Many African Americans end up working in very low-paying jobs, as janitors, domestic workers, or in food processing. In some cases, someone might have moved north after signing a contract with a specific factory, only to arrive and find they were strike-breakers, their labour used to end strikes intended to provide workers with better conditions and protections. Once the strike was over, the labourers from the south would often be fired. Not only was the job market a major challenge, but housing was as well: many northern U.S. cities had restrictive covenants, which would bar African Americans from residing in many parts of the city. Black neighbourhoods were often over-crowded, and weren’t located within walking distance from their workplaces. While the north offered opportunity to those escaping poor conditions in the south, there were still many racially discriminatory barriers in place that kept African Americans from “the good life.”

Jacob Lawrence – Migration Series, panel no. 23 (left) and 59 (right)
Source and more in this series: https://lawrencemigration.phillips.org/the-migration-series
Fences is set in the year 1957 – a significant moment in America’s history.

Activity: Let’s look at some ways that year was important. Below you’ll find a list of some of the year’s notable events. Working in groups or individually, have students choose one of these items to research further, with a focus on the historical significance of this event.

(Photos sources: L-R, top row: history.com; articles.extension.org; NOAA; 2nd row: SI.org; history.com; 3rd row: dailymail.co.uk; bet.com)
“A DREAM DEFERRED”: SPORT AND SEGREGATION IN AMERICA

Sports are meant to be a pursuit where the best physical performance wins. However, in reality, sports are always deeply connected to the politics of their time, and the game’s “level playing field” might turn out to be anything but. This was certainly the case for many African Americans pursuing elite and professional-level sports prior to the civil rights movement. Sports were an important space of opportunity and future potential for an individual seeking to change their social or economic circumstances, and as Scoop Jackson—a sports journalist with ESPN—notes, for African American athletes, “sports has been a component of freedom. It’s been the voice we’ve found through our arms and legs when our mouths have been silenced.” Jackson points out that the importance of sports extended beyond the activity itself, with players becoming symbols of what might be possible for others: “Our athletes have most often served a deeper purpose than their sports heroics. We see in them sources of salvation.”

However, American sports were subject to the same firmly established codes of racial segregation that developed after the abolition of slavery in 1865, exemplified by Jim Crow laws, legislation which strictly regulated the behaviour and rights of African Americans. Indeed, as Jesse Owens famously experienced, achievement in athletics did not guarantee equal treatment. After he competed and won in the controversial 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, he remarked that he received more respect from Hitler than he did from Franklin D. Roosevelt, who refused to invite Owens to the White House with other Olympic winners, and as Owens remarked, “The president didn’t even send me a telegram”. Owens had reached the top of his sport, and yet he was denied the recognition and congratulations traditionally bestowed upon Olympic gold medalists. After winning, Owens found himself blocked from the economic opportunities available to his white competitors: he was not eligible for college scholarships; his amateur status was revoked for seeking out endorsement contracts; and racial segregation laws made it difficult for him to find traditional employment. Rather than offering the opportunity to use one’s talent to rise to success despite life’s obstacles, Owens’ experience as an athlete further demonstrated the country’s intrinsic prejudices. There was not yet a level playing field in the U.S. upon which African Americans could compete.

Often, sports did not outright ban African American athletes, but there were restrictions that made participation difficult. Baseball was one such sport—there was no official rule that banned African American players from joining teams, and there were several notable Black players in the mid-to-late 1800s. However, racism was ever-present, and teams or clubs with a majority of African American players faced exclusion: they were barred from conventions, other teams would refuse to play against them, and individual athletes often experienced jeers and heckling from crowds. By 1877, Jim Crow laws were firmly entrenched in most states, and rising tensions among baseball leagues and teams led to more blunt discrimination in
the sport. Ten years later, the International League voted not to contract any African American baseball players onto its teams, setting a precedent of segregation that lasted until 1947, when Jackie Robinson broke the colour barrier by becoming the Brooklyn Dodgers’ second baseman, and went on to become the first Black MVP in the sport.

Facing exclusion from most baseball organizations, African American players formed their own teams and leagues, including the Negro National League, the Eastern Coloured League, the West Coast Negro Baseball League (co-founded by Jesse Owens), and many others. These leagues allowed businessmen and athletes to work together, carving out a space for African American achievement and self-determination in the United States; however, while top level teams and leagues achieved some staying power, it was difficult for Black leagues to sustain ownership and organization, particularly when access to stadiums was often controlled by white booking agents. Politics interfered in other ways: after the 1919 Chicago Race Riot, the National Guard occupied Schorling’s Park, the home field for the Giants, forcing all home games to be cancelled for a month. As Troy Maxson points out in *Fences*, baseball’s segregation ultimately limited Black athletes’ potential to access and succeed at the highest levels of the sport.

In “Harlem”, poet Langston Hughes muses, “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?...Or does it explode?” *Fences* shows us the effects of one deferred dream: Maxson’s chances at success cut off by baseball’s colour line. This is not simply a plot device—sports were significant because they represented opportunity, and allowed those who were oppressed by a racially segregated society to be recognized for their achievements and find financial success. In many cases, these paths to success were littered with obstacles that deferred or even derailed athletic pursuits. It wasn’t until Jackie Robinson’s success in 1947 that the sport began the journey towards becoming integrated—too late for many great players, but opening the door to success for future generations of African American athletes.

Source: Jackson, “Black Athletes: Beyond the Field”, *ESPN*
EXPANSION EXERCISE: POETRY ANALYSIS

LANGSTON HUGHES, “HARLEM”

WHAT HAPPENS TO A DREAM DEFERRED?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

This poem is the epigraph to Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, and is included in Djanet Sears’ Directors Note for Fences. What connections do you see between the poem, and either of these plays? Why do you think artists have been drawn to the pairing of this poem and their works?

What do you think Hughes means by the poem’s final line? What does it mean for a “dream deferred” to “explode”? What would that look like?

How does the poem make you feel? What is your first reaction to it? Do you feel a connection to what Hughes is describing? Have you ever experienced having a “dream deferred”? What happened?

Are there other works of art—movies, TV shows, books, paintings, etc.—that you’re reminded of when you read this poem? How are they similar or different?

Hughes is writing in the 1950s—do you think this poem is still relevant today? Why or why not?
STEP ONE: READ THE BELOW SCENE INDIVIDUALLY.

CORY: Yessir. (Pause.) Can I ask you a question?
TROY: What the hell you wanna ask me? Mr. Stawicki the one you got the questions for.
CORY: How come you ain’t never liked me?
TROY: Liked you? Who the hell say I got to like you? What law is there say I got to like you? Wanna stand up in my face and ask a damn fool-ass question like that. Talking about liking somebody. Come here, boy, when I talk to you. *(CORY comes over to where TROY is working. He stands slouched over and TROY shoves him on his shoulder.)* Straighten up, goddammit! I asked you a question . . . what law is there say I got to like you?
CORY: None.
TROY: Well, alright then! Don’t you eat every day? (Pause.) Answer me when I talk to you! Don’t you eat every day?
CORY: Yeah.
TROY: Nigger, as long as you in my house, you put that sir on the end of it when you talk to me!
CORY: Yes . . . sir.
TROY: You eat every day.
CORY: Yessir!
TROY: Got a roof over your head.
CORY: Yessir!
TROY: Got clothes on your back.
CORY: Yessir.
TROY: Why you think that is?
CORY: Cause of you.
TROY: Aw, hell I know it’s ’cause of me . . . but why do you think that is?
CORY: (Hesitant.) Cause you like me.
TROY: Like you? I go out of here every morning . . . bust my butt . . . putting up with them crackers every day . . . make I like you? You about the biggest fool I ever saw. (Pause.) It’s my job. It’s my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house . . . sleep you behind on my bedclothes . . . fill you belly up with my food . . . cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not ’cause I like you! Cause it’s my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you! Let’s get this straight right here . . . before it go along any further . . . I ain’t got to like you. Mr. Rand don’t give me my money come payday cause he likes me. He gives me cause he owe me. I done give you everything I had to give you. I gave you your life! Me and your mama worked that out between us. And liking your Black ass wasn’t part of the bargain. Don’t you try and go through life worrying about if somebody like you or not. You best be making sure they doing right by you. You understand what I’m saying, boy?
CORY: Yessir.
TROY: Then get the hell out of my face, and get on down to that A&P.
STEP TWO: WATCH THESE TWO VERSIONS OF THE SCENE

[Video 1]

[Video 2]

STEP THREE: DISCUSS

Did watching the scene change your perspective or understanding of it from when you read it? In what ways was watching it different?

What are some of the similarities and differences between the two versions of the scene? How do the actors playing Troy interpret the character differently? How do they actors playing Cory interpret that character differently?

Why do you think that Cory’s question makes Troy angry?

How would you describe Troy’s view of parenting? Why do you think he views his relationship with his son in the way that he does? What factors might have influenced his perspective?

Do you think that Troy and Cory can understand each other’s perspectives? What factors do you think would prevent or enable them to understand one another?
ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHARACTER SKETCHES

In groups or as individuals, work to create a description of one of the characters listed below, answering the following questions:

- What motivates this character? What makes them get up out of bed in the morning? What inspires them to take action and why?
- What scares this character?
- What does this character want? Do they get what they want? If so, what effect does that achievement have on them? If not, why not? What prevents them from getting what they want? What effect does that loss have on them?

CHARACTERS: Gabriel, Troy, Cory, Rose

THE ENDING – DISCUSSION

_Fences_ ends somewhat enigmatically. What do you make of the final scene? What happens in that final scene? Consider mapping it out as a class.

What is significant about what happens in the final scene? What aspects of the plot meet a resolution? What aspects of the narrative are you left wondering about?

What does Gabriel signify? What is his role in this final scene? What does he do and why?

What did you feel at the end of the play? How did you react to it?

Why do you think the play ends the way it does? What meaning or feeling does the ending suggest to you?
FURTHER READING

_A Raisin in the Sun_. Lorraine Hansberry.
“When it was first produced in 1959, _A Raisin in the Sun_ was awarded the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for that season and hailed as a watershed in American drama. A pioneering work by an African-American playwright, the play was a radically new representation of Black life.” – Penguin Randomhouse

_Clybourne Park_. Bruce Norris.
“In 1959, Russ and Bev are selling their desirable two-bed for a knock-down price, enabling the first Black family to move into the neighbourhood and alarming the cosy white urbanites of Clybourne Park, Chicago. In 2009 the same property is being bought by Lindsey and Steve, a young white couple, whose plan to raze the house and start again is met with a similar response. As the arguments rage and tensions rise, ghosts and racial resentments are once more uncovered…” – Amazon.ca

_Invisible Man_. Ralph Ellison.
The nameless narrator of the novel describes growing up in a Black community in the South, attending a Negro college from which he is expelled, moving to New York and becoming the chief spokesman of the Harlem branch of “the Brotherhood”, and retreating amid violence and confusion to the basement lair of the Invisible Man he imagines himself to be. The book is a passionate and witty tour de force of style, strongly influenced by T.S. Eliot’s _The Waste Land_, Joyce, and Dostoevsky.

_The Bluest Eye_. Toni Morrison.
Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl, prays every day for beauty. Mocked by other children for the dark skin, curly hair, and brown eyes that set her apart, she yearns for normalcy, for the blond hair and blue eyes that she believes will allow her to finally fit in. Yet as her dream grows more fervent, her life slowly starts to disintegrate in the face of adversity and strife. A powerful examination of our obsession with beauty and conformity, Toni Morrison’s virtuosic first novel asks powerful questions about race, class, and gender with the subtlety and grace that have always characterized her writing.

_Native Son_. Richard Wright.
“Right from the start, Bigger Thomas had been headed for jail. It could have been for assault or petty larceny; by chance, it was for murder and rape. _Native Son_ tells the story of this young black man caught in a downward spiral after he kills a young white woman in a brief moment of panic. Set in Chicago in the 1930s, Wright’s powerful novel is an unsparing reflection on the poverty and feelings of hopelessness experienced by people in inner cities across the country and of what it means to be Black in America.” - HarperCollins
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. Maya Angelou.

“Here is a book as joyous and painful, as mysterious and memorable, as childhood itself. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings captures the longing of lonely children, the brute insult of bigotry, and the wonder of words that can make the world right. Maya Angelou’s debut memoir is a modern American classic beloved worldwide.” – Penguin Randomhouse

The Color Purple. Alice Walker.

“Celie is a poor Black woman whose letters tell the story of 20 years of her life, beginning at age 14 when she is being abused by her father and attempting to protect her sister from the same fate, and continuing over the course of her marriage to “Mister,” a brutal man who terrorizes her. Celie eventually learns that her abusive husband has been keeping her sister’s letters from her and the rage she feels, combined with an example of love and independence provided by her close friend Shug, pushes her finally toward an awakening of her creative and loving self.” - Scholastic


“Cora is a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia... When Caesar, a recent arrival from Virginia, tells her about the Underground Railroad, they decide to take a terrifying risk and escape. Matters do not go as planned—Cora kills a young white boy who tries to capture her. Though they manage to find a station and head north, they are being hunted. Like the protagonist of Gulliver's Travels, Cora encounters different worlds at each stage of her journey—hers is an odyssey through time as well as space. As Whitehead brilliantly re-creates the unique terrors for Black people in the pre—Civil War era, his narrative seamlessly weaves the saga of America from the brutal importation of Africans to the unfulfilled promises of the present day. The Underground Railroad is at once a kinetic adventure tale of one woman’s ferocious will to escape the horrors of bondage and a shattering, powerful meditation on the history we all share.” – Amazon.ca

Between the World and Me. Ta-Nehisi Coates.

“In a profound work that pivots from the biggest questions about American history and ideals to the most intimate concerns of a father for his son, Ta-Nehisi Coates offers a powerful new framework for understanding our nation’s history and current crisis... What is it like to inhabit a Black body and find a way to live within it? And how can we all honestly reckon with this fraught history and free ourselves from its burden? Between the World and Me is Ta-Nehisi Coates’s attempt to answer these questions in a letter to his adolescent son. Coates shares with his son—and readers—the story of his awakening to the truth about his place in the world through a series of revelatory experiences.” – Penguin Randomhouse