

Fences Seminar Questions

Please read over these questions and be ready to discuss them in class tomorrow.

1. **What's in a name?** – The connotations of Troy Maxon's name seem significant. His first name reminds us of the ancient city of Troy, site of the Trojan War, and his last name seems to make reference to the Mason-Dixon Line—the imaginary line that in the 1820s divided slave states from free states. **How do both these allusions to history help us understand Troy's character and illuminate the play's themes? Moreover, what are the connotations of other characters' names—for example, Rose, Gabriel, and Lyons?**

2. **What helps you get out of bed in the morning and makes you feel like you belong...**

When Troy criticizes Lyons' lifestyle, Lyon replies, "I know I got to eat. But I got to live too. I need something that gonna help me to get out of the bed in the morning. Make me feel like I belong in the world" (I.1.340-341). **What does Lyons mean here, and how do these ideas apply not only to Lyons, but to Troy, Rose, and Cory? For each central character, what makes that character feel some sense of belonging in the world?**

3. **Sins of the Father** – Speaking about the infant Raynell, Rose tells Troy, "She's innocent...and you can't visit the sins of the father on the child" (1373). **How is the concept of the sins of the father—and the sins' effects on the innocent child—of central significance to *Fences*? Which different fathers do we learn about in the course of the story (including Jim Bono's father), and in what ways have each father's "sins" impacted the lives of his children?**

4. **Fences and Barriers** – **How do "fences" and barriers—both real and metaphorical—play a meaningful role in the play and in the lives and relationships of the play's characters? Which specific fences and barriers exist in the play, and who has built them? Which "fences" are emotional barriers, and why do they exist? In addition, are any "fences" removed or taken down in the course of the play? Overall, which fences or barriers are most significant in the story?**

5. **Troy's Character – The Crooked and the Straights**

Troy Maxson is a character with contradictions. In the final scene, Lyons twice quotes Troy's words for Cory: "You got to take the crooked with the straights." In other words, you have to accept the bad with the good and the wrong with the right, because they come together as a package that cannot be separated—and nothing and nobody is perfect. **How does this concept apply to Troy's character—both the negatives and the positives? Based on his decisions and actions, in what ways can we view Troy as an immoral or flawed character, and in what ways can we view Troy as a moral or even great character? Why is Troy so complex and contradictory, and why are Troy's contradictions and his moral ambiguity especially meaningful in the world of the play?**

6. **Rose's Character**

What are the most significant aspects of Rose's character, and how does her character illuminate the play?

Given that Rose is the only adult woman who appears in the play, what are her most important traits, words, and actions, and how is Rose central to the play's impact and meaning? Moreover, to what degree is Rose an example of feminism and the emancipation of women, an example of the repressed role of women in society, or neither?

7. **The Adult Cory** – When Cory returns after Troy’s death, he tells Rose, “I can’t drag Papa with me everywhere I go. I’ve got to say no to him” (II.5.110). What finally convinces Cory to attend Troy’s funeral? Has Cory said “no” to his father? What does Cory’s decision to attend the funeral suggest about Cory’s future and what kind of home, family, and relationships he will have?

8. **Jim Bono** – What role does Bono play in the development of Troy’s character? Pick a scene that you think shows Bono’s role most clearly, and then explain.

9. **The Motif of Brothers**

The play includes two pairs of brothers: Lyons and Cory, and Troy and Gabriel. How are both pairs of brothers important in the play, and what complex effects does this double duality contribute to the play?

10. **Baseball**

Troy speaks in baseball analogies a lot. How do Troy’s baseball analogies reveal his character and the illuminate the way he perceives life, himself, and his relationships? Moreover, where do Troy’s baseball analogies reveal an accurate and illuminating understanding of life, and where do his baseball analogies reveal a flawed understanding of life and relationships?

11. **The Motif of Improving One’s Life**

In the play, Rose reveals an early theme of the play when she states, “Some people don't know that improving their lives is possible.” How does this statement apply to different characters in the play, including Troy, Rose, Lyons, and Cory?

12. **Identified by an Institution** – By the end of *Fences*, besides young Raynell, every character still alive in Troy’s family has either joined an institution or been forced into some sort of institution: Rose has joined the church, Lyons is serving time in the penitentiary, Gabriel is institutionalized in the mental hospital, and Cory is serving time in the U.S. Marines. The only Maxson who is not defined by an institution is Raynell, Troy’s daughter. Discuss the complex significance that this “institutionalization” of Troy’s family members contributes to the play. Moreover, what is the significance of the fact that Raynell is the sole remaining Maxson whose life is not defined by an institution?

13. **Family Duty and Responsibility**

Troy prides himself on his sense of duty and responsibility for his family, yet he seems unable to recognize that there are things that he has failed to provide for his family. Why does Troy perceive his sense of responsibility as virtuous, while Rose and Cory perceive the same quality in him as destructive? What does racism have to do with Troy’s sense of responsibility for his family? How does Troy’s approach to responsibility fail both Gabriel and Lyons? How does it fail Rose? When it comes to Troy’s responsibility to Rose and to his children, what is Troy unable—or unwilling—to see or understand about himself and about others?