

Fences



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AUGUST WILSON

The fourth of six children, Wilson was raised in a poor neighborhood of Pittsburgh predominately populated by black Americans, as well as Italian and Jewish immigrants. Upon the divorce of his mother and father in the 1950s, Wilson and his family would move to Hazelwood—a mainly white, working-class section of Pittsburgh where their appearance, as a black family, wasn't met with open arms. Facing racist rage—their Hazelwood home had bricks thrown through its windows—they soon moved to a new home. Dropping out of high school in the tenth grade after being falsely accused of plagiarizing a twenty-page paper on Napoleon I, Wilson worked odd jobs and made great use of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Library. The gifted Wilson had learned to read at age four, and ultimately received an honorary high school diploma from the library for the precocious extent to which he educated himself with its books. Best known for his plays *Fences*, [The Piano Lesson](#) (both of which won the Pulitzer Prize), [Joe Turner's Come and Gone](#), and [Ma Rainey's Black Bottom](#), Wilson once said that his work was most influenced by “four B's”—blues music, the writers Jorge Luis Borges and Amiri Baraka, and Romare Bearden, a painter. Wilson ultimately wrote sixteen plays, ten of which comprised what's called his *Pittsburgh Cycle* (or *Century Cycle*), as nine of them take place in the city's Hill District, an African-American neighborhood. Wilson died at the age of 60 in Seattle, from liver cancer, leaving a legacy behind him as one of the 20th century's most prominent playwrights.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Fences takes place in the era of segregation in the United States, when many public spaces were only open to whites and closed-off to blacks. It also occurs at a time of a burgeoning black rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when such leaders as Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks would come to the fore and alter history with their courage, conviction, and leadership.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Wilson's wrote (out of his sixteen plays in total) nine other plays which, grouped with *Fences*, constitute what's called his *Pittsburgh* or *Century Cycle*—all of which deal with themes of duty, honor, betrayal, and love with an aim at raising consciousness about and empathy towards black experience in the United States.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Fences*
- **When Written:** 1983-1987
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** June 1986
- **Literary Period:** Black Urban Realism
- **Genre:** Tragic Comedy, Drama
- **Setting:** Pittsburgh's Hill District in the 1950s
- **Climax:** The climax of *Fences* occurs when Cory tries to fight Troy with a baseball bat, enraged at the way his father has always treated him and at his betrayal of his mother, Rose.
- **Antagonist:** While none of the characters in-themselves embody an antagonist, Troy's fictional, personified figure of “Mr. Death” is something of a personal enemy to him, making the abstract, impersonal force of death into something more intimately meaningful.
- **Point of View:** Theater

EXTRA CREDIT

Autobiography. August Wilson wrote a one-man play called *How I Learned What I Learned*, which follows his own life as a young writer, exploring his struggles and the influences he drew from the Hill District of Pittsburgh.

Big Screen, Big Stars. *Fences* was made into an award-winning 2016 film starring Denzel Washington and Viola Davis. Wilson died in 2005, but finished a draft of the screenplay before his death.



PLOT SUMMARY

Divided into two acts, *Fences* begins on a Friday night—payday for Bono and Troy—when the two friends engage in a weekly ritual of drink and conversation. As they talk, we learn that Troy has confronted their boss, Mr. Rand, about the fact that only whites are assigned to drive the trucks at their garbage collection company, while black employees are hired exclusively to carry the garbage. Bono then suggests that he's suspicious of Troy's relationship with another woman (Alberta) besides his wife. Further, Cory, Troy's son, has the opportunity to play college football, but Troy is wary about his son playing sports because of his own past with racial discrimination in major league baseball. Troy also succumbs to his tendency to spin tall tales about his life, and starts talking about his encounter with “Mr. Death”—when he wrestled with the Grim Reaper. Rose, Troy's wife, enters and reveals that he's really talking about his

battle with pneumonia.

Later, Troy and Cory work on constructing a **fence** which Rose has asked them to build, and the two clash over Cory's desire to play football. Troy thinks that, as a young black man, Cory has no future in football, but says he will allow Cory to pursue football on one condition: he must work his job at the A&P store and juggle football practice at the same time. Even though Cory is scheduled to meet with a recruiter, who would present Troy papers which, if he'd sign, would secure his son a position at a college, Troy is difficult, and says he won't sign anything unless Cory works.

Eventually, we learn that Cory never gets his job at the A&P back, and Troy—having found this out too—tells his coach to take him off the team. This enrages Cory, as the future he'd envisioned for himself has crumbled before his eyes. Troy tells him that his disobedience—in not getting his job back at the A&P—counts as a strike against him, like a strike in baseball.

When working on building Rose's fence, Bono tells Troy that he thinks he should realize just how good and loving of a woman Rose is to him. Irritated by the fact that Bono feels the need to tell him this, Troy asks why Bono feels motivated to say such a thing. Troy eventually admits to having an affair with Alberta, and Bono tells him that he needs to find a way to make things right. He also says that he's always looked up to Troy, precisely because of his wise decision to choose Rose over all the other women who were interested in him.

Soon after, Troy confesses to Rose that he's had the affair with Alberta and that he's going to be a father to her baby. Shocked, Rose can't believe Troy would do such a thing at his age, and stands up for herself, blaming Troy for not sacrificing himself enough for the preservation of the relationship. Walking in on Troy and Rose fighting, Cory is angered at the sight of Troy roughly holding Rose by the arm, and fights his dad, earning yet another supposed "strike."

Later, we learn that Alberta died when she gave birth to Troy's baby, Raynell. Rose agrees to raise Raynell. Then, on another one of Troy's Fridays, Troy and Cory end their relationship, in an argument over Troy's infidelity to Rose.

The play then drops off for eight years—the last act begins at the advent of Troy's death. The family—Cory, Lyons (Troy's son from a wife before Rose), Rose, Raynell, and Gabriel (Troy's brother, who suffers from a brain injury and thinks he's an angel)—are gathered at the Maxson household, with Bono, preparing to attend Troy's funeral. Cory, however, says that he does not want to attend—and Rose reprimands him, saying that Cory is obligated to go because Troy was his father, and that refraining from mourning his dad doesn't make him into a man. Gabriel enters the scene and tries to play the music of spiritual exaltation with his "trumpet of judgment," but no sound comes out. In response, Gabriel dances hysterically, and August Wilson writes, in a note in the script, that the gates to Heaven

are opened.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Troy Maxson – The husband of Rose, and father to Cory and Lyons, Troy is the central character of *Fences*. Shaped by the effects racism has had on his life—by the struggles it created in his youth and the career ambitions that it thwarted, including his desire to be a baseball player—Troy lives in the shadow of what could, and what should, have been. The play can largely be described as charting how Troy's actions, as they're informed by his past, affect those around him: how his own shattered sense of hope ripples into and distorts the aspirations and dreams of those around him—how the racism of his world growing-up continues to express itself through Troy's actions, indirectly shaping those of a new generation. As a result of Troy's experiences, he has become a man who at once espouses and insists on rigid practicality in order to protect himself and his family from the world, even as he indulges (or can't stop himself from indulging) in a kind of wild impracticality of his own as a way to escape or redress the unfairness he perceives as having thwarted his own life. This inner contrast – which to those around him can feel like hypocrisy – is evident in a variety of ways. For instance, Troy can't see anything practical, or therefore worthwhile, in the professions (music and baseball, respectively) to which his sons Lyons and Cory each aspire. But at the same time, Troy's affair with Alberta suggests that he's perfectly willing to engage in something not grounded in practicality, but rather in pure pleasure divorced from the needs of his family. Similarly, Troy's willingness to protest the unfair treatment of blacks in his workplace (they're only hired to carry garbage, while whites are exclusively hired to drive the trucks), embodies a progressive view on the possibilities of race which mirrors the possibilities that his sons see for the future of race relations. But, in Cory's particular case, he sees such possibilities as unrealistic (i.e., his belief that Cory will never succeed in professional football because black players aren't given a chance). Troy's inner conflict seems also to play out in the way he puts a fantastical spin on the reality of his past, such as telling fanciful tales about encounters he's had with a personified form (the grim reaper or the devil) of **death**. These fantasies of Troy's suggest that his past failures and suffering have pushed his mind, perhaps as a kind of involuntary self-defense, to favor imagination and fictional constructions over any consistent, constant consideration of his real past. Yet, while August Wilson seems concerned with highlighting this conflict and hypocrisy at the core of Troy's character, he's perhaps not condemning Troy personally. Rather, Wilson shows how Troy is the product of historical, racist forces beyond his control; he shows how Troy is a vehicle for these forces, for their reproduction and reinforcement on a new generation.

Cory Maxson – The son of Troy and Rose, Cory embodies a hope for the future unmet by the pessimism of his father. When Cory seeks love and compassion in his relationship with Troy, it's met with a hardened toughness, as his father believes that his relationship with his son is born out of sheer duty—not love. Raised in an era where the racism Troy experienced in his youth has, to a rather small yet significant extent, faded—and where opportunities for black lives have begun to open—Cory has an optimism about his future. Troy, however, views Cory's career aspirations as idealistic and detached from the realities of a racist society where, for instance, he believes the white-dominated sports world will not support his son's ambition to become a football player. August Wilson therefore casts Cory as an opposing force to Troy's views and the values for which Troy stands, and this clash drives the story at the core of *Fences*. Cory also undergoes his own development over the course of the play, coming of age when he finally stands up to his father and leaves home to join the Marines, but maturing even further when at the end of the play he rethinks his plan to refuse to go to his father's funeral. In other words, Cory must learn to stand up to his father, but also to respect the struggle his father faced that made him who he was.

Rose Maxson – Wife to Troy and mother of Cory, Rose represents the maternal gentleness of the Maxson household. In opposition to Troy's toughness and disrespect for Cory's feelings and opinions, Rose is a source of love and understanding. While Troy discourages Cory's dream of playing football, Rose supports her son's ambitions, and tries to convince her husband that times have changed since he played sports—that Cory's skin color will not bar him from a future in sports, like it might have in the past. Rose largely serves as the voice of reason for her husband. While Troy is prone to telling tall tales about his life, Rose always corrects him and translates his fictions into the actual acts they represent. When Troy tries to say that he met the **Grim Reaper** and wrestled with him, Rose decodes his fantasy, and reveals that he's talking about when he contracted pneumonia. Rose is also characterized by her devotion to her family, and her willingness to sacrifice her desires to be the best wife and mother she possibly can, and provide the most love she can muster. In contrast, Troy gives into his desires even when they take him beyond his commitment to the family, as we see in his affair with Alberta. Rose, however, believes in preserving the bonds which hold her family together, as embodied in her wish for a **fence** to border her home. Wanting to keep her family close to her, and the integrity of its bonds intact, Rose is crushed when she learns that Troy has betrayed her and the private, enclosed space of protection she envisions as the relationship they vowed to sustain and protect.

Lyons Maxson – The son to Troy and his former, unnamed wife (prior to Rose), Lyons strives, against the wishes of his father, to be a professional musician. While Lyons claims to be

fundamentally dedicated to music—while he claims that music is the only reason he gets out of bed every morning—August Wilson writes, in a note in the script, that Lyons is more obsessed with the *idea* of being a musician than with the actual art and practice of music itself. Like his brother Cory, therefore, Lyons's dreams challenge Troy's rigid sense of what constitutes a proper profession. However, while Cory ultimately succeeds in paving a way for himself—even if it's through the military, and not through playing football, as he first intended—Lyons ultimately fails. Too narrowly focused on becoming a musician, Lyons has to resort to crime (cashing other peoples' checks) in order to make ends meet. Following in his father's footsteps, Lyons ends up in jail.

Gabriel Maxson – Troy's brother, Gabriel is the victim of a brain-injury he received at war. As a result of the injury, Gabe's gone insane and lives trapped in the psychotic belief that he is St. Gabriel. He therefore sings songs warning about judgment day, and frequently mentions that he's working to chase hellhounds (sinning demons) away; he even tells Troy that he's personally seen his name in St. Peter's book of judgment. While Gabe insists that he's in regular association with renowned religious figures, he also considers himself to no longer be human, and to have died and been spiritually reborn into his sainthood. In this chronic preoccupation with his own immortality and spiritual destiny, Gabe is yet another avenue through which the play's portrayal of mortality finds a voice. Gabe's obsession with the final day of judgment resonates with the eventual death of Troy, whom Gabe subtly foreshadows through his preoccupation with the end of the world.

Jim Bono – Troy's best friend, Bono is the follower in their relationship, evidenced by his admission to Troy when confronting him about his affair with Alberta. Ever since Bono observed Troy's decision to take Rose's hand in marriage, Bono admired his sensibility and wisdom. Troy, though attractive to many women, chose to commit himself to Rose, and this signaled to Bono that he was a man worth following; that Troy would lead Bono somewhere prosperous in life. Unlike Rose, Bono gives-in to Troy's fantasies—to his fictional tales about meeting with **Mr. Death**, probably as a result of Bono's own, somewhat blind devotion to what he views as Troy's strength and work ethic. Further, whereas Troy ultimately embodies betrayal and the hurt caused by adultery, Bono constantly demonstrates a devotion to his wife, Lucille. Whenever Bono leaves the Maxson household, he says he must get home to Lucille—even on Friday nights, when he and Troy engage in their ritual of drink and conversation, Bono leaves a little early in order to get home to his wife.

Raynell – The child of Troy and Alberta, Raynell is ultimately raised by Rose after both Troy and Alberta die. In this way, Raynell challenges the “fences” that Rose envisions as surrounding, protecting, and holding together her real family. At one point in the play, Rose tells Troy, upon learning of

Raynell's impending birth, that she's never wanted anything "half" to enter her family. Raynell's appearance in the world therefore stretches Rose's ideal sense of a family unified by parental, biological blood, and Rose's decision to raise her marks a broadening of her conception of what a family can be and how far her love can stretch.

Alberta – Alberta is the woman with whom Troy has an affair. At the beginning of the play, Troy and Bono talk crudely about her attractive physique, and Bono questions Troy about his involvement with her throughout the book. Eventually, Bono realizes that Troy is having an affair with Alberta, and tells Troy that he must make everything right. Ultimately, Troy fails at this: he impregnates Alberta (with Raynell), and as a result his eighteen-year-relationship with Rose disintegrates.

Mr. Rand – Mr. Rand is Troy and Bono's manager/overseer at the garbage collection company. Troy confronts Mr. Rand about the racism he perceives in the workplace: that exclusively whites are hired to drive the garbage trucks, while blacks are only hired to collect and carry the garbage. Ultimately, Troy's complaint gets noticed by the garbage company, since the union to which he and Bono belong pressure it into giving him a position as a driver. Troy says that Mr. Rand had a difficult time getting out the words when delivering him the news of his promotion.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lucille – Wife to Bono, Lucille barely appears in the play. Bono always cites her as the reason why he must go home—why he must depart from the Maxson household when he visits. In this way, Lucille reveals Bono's marital devotion, in direct contrast to Troy's adultery.

Mr. Stawicki – Mr. Stawicki is Cory's boss at the A&P store.

Coach Zellman – Coach Zellman is Cory's football coach in high school—it's due to Zellman that Cory catches the eye of a college recruiter, but Troy ultimately tells Zellman to ban Cory from the team.

Bonnie – Bonnie is Lyons's girlfriend early-on in the play; we learn in the end, however, that he's left her and found another partner.

Ms. Pearl – Ms. Pearl owns the apartment Gabe moves into after he decides to leave the Maxson household in order to, as he says, get out of Troy's hair.



BLACKNESS AND RACE RELATIONS

Set in Pittsburgh in the 1950s, *Fences* explores the experience of one black family living in the era of segregation and a burgeoning black rights movement, exposing, at the heart of its characters' psychology, a dynamic between the inner world of a black community and the expanse of white power around it.

The **fence** which Troy gradually builds in front of his house serves as a symbol of segregation, as well as the general psychological need to build a fortress where a black 'inside' or interior can set itself off from the white-dominated world around it. From one angle, the fence represents the geographical effects of segregation in general: the fencing-off of blacks, the creation of ethnic insularity in certain neighborhoods, and it is a monument to this basic social division effected by white economic and political power. Yet Troy also builds the fence himself; it's largely his own creation, though Rose initially tasks him with building it. Rose wants the fence in order to set her and her family off from the outside world, to protect a private interior of their experience—lived, black experience—from an outside world threatening to invade it, and from the divisive effects which white power inflicts upon society. While the latter divides with the aim of controlling and limiting black prosperity and influence, the division effected by Troy's fence is one of protection and an affirmation of the world within it.

Throughout the play, we also see how its characters are forced to define their world in terms of how it's limited by a racist system of white social and economic power. We see that Troy's workplace, for instance, is organized according to a racial hierarchy privileging whites, since exclusively white men are hired to drive the company's garbage trucks, while black men are only hired as garbage collectors. Further, much of the characters' speech relies on pointing out their status as people of color in order to describe their position in relation to white power.

Wilson's play therefore, in part, concerns itself with depicting how racism governs and structures the everyday lives of its characters, in order to expose—through the concrete experiences of one family—racism's many effects on the black American community of the 1950s at large. The meaning behind and need for the fence, and the play's exposure of a black world in many ways defined by its oppression, are a scathing condemnation of the division and pain inflicted by white power. *Fences* gives a palpable reality to the abstract mechanisms of racism and white power—it reveals the pain of, as well as the aspirations and opportunities withheld from, its black characters. Through framing pain as being at the heart of almost all its characters' lives, Wilson reveals the psychological complexity and intensely tiresome and tasking nature of navigating a racist world divided principally between white and black. At the same time, he reveals how that division divides



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

blacks themselves through the pain it inflicts upon them (such as Troy's conflict with Cory over his desire to play football, since Troy's parenting is informed by his past experience of discrimination in the world of sports).



PRACTICALITY, IDEALISM, AND RACE

Fences explores the different views some of its characters have about what's feasible, achievable, and practical or life-sustaining with regard to career ambitions and future goals. Troy disapproves of the livelihoods to which his sons aspire, considering them to be idealistic dreams compared to what he views as more practical trades. Troy's disapproval, especially in Cory's case, is largely informed by his own experience growing up black. Cory's youth—his experience growing up in a different period of history—however, affords him a broader view of what the future might hold in store for him, of the careers open to him as a young black male. Consequently, he has a different understanding of what qualify as practical, viable ambitions.

Troy doesn't think Cory should pursue a future in football, since he believes that black people are prohibited from success in the white-dominated world of sports. Troy's past in the sharecropping South, and his experience as a talented baseball player whose career could never take flight because of discrimination, have all informed his sense of black life and opportunity in the world around him. It's this background which makes Troy perceive Cory's ambition as idealistic, and not grounded in reality or practical. Further, while Lyons says music is something essential to life, Troy sees Lyons' lifestyle as shirking the responsibility and hard work Troy associates with a man's 'proper' profession. Though Lyons says he values being a musician for a value intrinsic to it, Troy thinks only about money, finding Lyons's ambitions to be impractical. Lyons lifestyle fails to adequately provide for him, but he nonetheless continues to pursue music over a more stable trade.

Does *Fences* suggest that the idealism of Cory or Lyons is a better choice than Troy's practicality? While Wilson ultimately writes Troy's existence off at the end of the play with an aura of failure, dissatisfaction, anger, and betrayal, it might be too simplistic to say that this is a gesture of critique—that Wilson condemns Troy's practicality altogether. Further, the fact that his sons appear to be more compassionate, level-headed, and hopeful as human beings are not sufficient grounds to say that Wilson favors their idealism over Troy's practicality. Rather than taking a stance on either, Wilson seems more concerned with showing us how the social world of white power and racism, and how it changes and evolves through time, *forms* its characters' perceptions of idealism and practicality—how, to a great extent, especially as disenfranchised black men, Troy and his sons' perceptions of idealism and practicality are molded by the white power outside and around them.

Troy's practicality, informed by his sense of failure at the hands

of racial discrimination, ultimately leads him to become an embittered man who withholds affection from those around him, and who cannot see past his own horizon when it comes to thinking about his sons' futures. But Wilson perhaps wants to show us that people like Troy exist because an unjust world has hurt and formed them, and that the pain which racism inflicts on such people gets recycled into the generation they raise. Wilson doesn't seem to want to delegitimize Troy as a human being by implying that his practicality is something which he personally invented—rather, he wants to educate a white audience, and give a voice to a black audience, about the suffering which exists in people like Troy, why it exists, and how it is passed on.

Similarly, Cory and Lyons are not treated by Wilson as a choice in an ethical decision between idealism versus practicality, but rather as two views of a racially divided world informed by a different, more progressive but still grossly regressive social atmosphere—as the two have different personal pasts than Troy. By pitting Troy against Cory and Lyons, Wilson again shows us how white power not only separates itself from blackness, but also separates and divides blacks themselves. While not picking a side, Wilson positions the play from the standpoint of a more historical perspective about how these sides are formed, and how they shape future generations, at the same time that he grounds that higher perspective in a family's everyday lived experience.



MANHOOD AND FATHERS

The play largely revolves around the turbulent relationship between Troy and his children—particularly his relationship with Cory.

Cory's desire to assert his own manhood and determine his own future clashes with the authority Troy feels as a father. Further, Cory's ambitions go against everything Troy thinks will be good and healthy for his son's prosperity.

Cory evolves in the play from cowering in fear of his father to ultimately severing his ties with him in a gesture of 'masculine' hubris. While Cory grew up being incredibly passive and submissive to his father out of fear, he gradually starts acting out of his own self-interest (such as his pursuit of football) in his later teens. Troy actively denounces Cory's attempts to define and pursue his own goals, and believes that Cory is obligated to absolutely bend to his way insofar as Cory lives under his roof. But this eventually pushes Cory to leave home and curse his father's treatment of him and his mother. Earlier in the play, Troy describes a similar situation with his own father growing up. Troy's father, while a tough man to live with, looked after his children, according to his account. But Troy, getting into a severe conflict with his father one day, left his father—like his own son—to go out on his own.

Perhaps as a symptom of his own struggles with leading a stable life as an independent man, Troy, in trying to protect

Cory from similar struggles, seems to ultimately think that Cory's desire to make his own decisions fundamentally contradicts their father-son relationship. It's as if, in order for Cory to become a man—which would inevitably involve assuming independence from his father's command—he must necessarily be at odds with his father.

Further, Wilson seems to be exposing us to one kind of 'masculinity,' one way it is constructed and defined—and how that construction is based in the social world around it as well as in the characters' personal history. In this case, the masculinity is that of Troy, and can be interpreted as something of an archetype of a certain kind of working black father in the 50s.

This masculinity is defined by having defied one's father in the past, endured poverty propped-up by a racist society, and failed to follow one's dreams—but having nonetheless *survived*, stayed alive, and kept going, despite all the odds. In the eyes of their father, then, Cory and Lyons live comparatively privileged lives having been entirely provided for until they were grown. But, in the eyes of Troy's sons—especially Cory—this isn't enough. Cory doesn't feel loved by his father, and can't see how his father's harshness is in anyway symptomatic of something larger than him and beyond his control. The play perhaps shouldn't be read as siding with Troy's treatment of his children and his decisions in raising them—rather, it tries to show, once again, how two worldviews clash in the father-son relation.

Wilson doesn't seem to offer a clean-cut solution to escaping the cycle of misunderstanding, anger, and stuck-in-the-past-ness characteristic of men like Troy and their fathers. He does show, however, how they can have such incredible power in shaping the future of their children—e.g., Cory doesn't get to go to college—and therefore the future generation. Additionally, Wilson shows how difficult it is to free oneself from such a father without totally severing the relationship.

Ultimately, Wilson's decision to make the conflict between father and son the central pivot of the play underscores his desire to show how abstract forces of history—particularly white social and economic power—manifest themselves, through their racist exertion on peoples' lives, in real, concrete, everyday lived black experience. The microscopic, psychological relationship between a father and his son is one of the most intimate venues for those more macroscopic forces, and as such, is very powerful to witness—it's a venue with an educational power for white audiences.



FAMILY, DUTY, AND BETRAYAL

Fences is a portrayal of family life—of how its characters view their roles as individual family members, and how they each define their

commitment or duty to the family; it also explores how betrayal can break the familial bond.

Troy refuses to tell Cory he loves him; rather, Troy tells Cory he only acts out of *duty* towards him as a son, and that there's no reason that love necessarily must be involved. Duty, for Troy, is the foundation of family—but it's almost indistinguishable from how Troy views professional duty (as an act one is obligated to perform regardless of one's personal feelings towards one's employer—e.g., he speaks of Mr. Rand in this way). If love isn't a factor that distinguishes family from profession—if family is just a contractual obligation—then Troy must not find much of anything about family life particularly rewarding or unique.

Troy's affair with Alberta doesn't conflict with his understanding of family as founded on duty. Troy largely view his obligation and connection to his family as fiscal, and nothing more. Further, Troy's betrayal of Rose ultimately reveals how the ties of families like his are fundamentally based upon the relationship between the two spouses who create it—in this case, a black man and woman raising a family in relative poverty—and upon whose union, which isn't guaranteed, the survival of those ties depend. Troy's betrayal therefore reveals a crack at the heart of family life: the fact that the idea of a family as a stably defined, pre-existing structure of human experience and development is quite complicated. Dishonoring his bond with Rose, Troy's family starts to fall apart.

Further, the idea of what the Maxson family really 'is' gets complicated by the addition of Troy's baby with Alberta, Raynell, whom Rose lets into the family after Alberta's death, becoming her adoptive mother. The family, therefore, is revealed to be a system of pledges and vows which, as such, can morph and evolve over time. This sense of pledging is emphasized by Rose's reply to Troy when he admits to his affair—Rose emphasizes the intense sacrifices she's made for her relationship with Troy, saying that there were definitely times she wanted to pursue more fun and satisfaction by being with other men, but that she refused because of her vows.

Rose also defends her view of family as essential and unbreakable by insisting that Cory attend his father's funeral, despite his wish to skip it. While Cory considers himself separated from his father, Rose invokes family as something which should surpass personal differences. Yet, at the same time, this is not an invocation of Troy's kind of duty. For Rose, family is more than a fiscal contract. She tells Troy she felt a devotion to him based on a moral sacrifice of her own, personal longings—a sacrifice which adultery undoes and betrays. Unlike Troy's sense of obligation, adultery conflicts with Rose's sense of moral duty.

Whereas Troy thinks that his adultery is something permissible, and which Rose should be able to accept and wrap her head around because of all the sacrifices he's made to support the family, Rose rejects this. She affirms that she's made sacrifices too, but they transcend sacrifices motivated merely by making money and doing one's job as a provider in getting food on the table and maintaining the house. Rather, Rose's 'duty' is one of

staying together and protecting the bonds of the family—bonds which she, again, sees as something never to be broken.



MORTALITY

The topic of death appears throughout the play in various forms, both in the physical death of two characters (Troy and Alberta), as well as in the stories told by Troy and through his brother Gabriel's obsession with the Christian afterlife.

Troy mentions the grim reaper (“**Mr. Death**”) several times throughout the play, telling a story about how they once wrestled. Troy seems to believe that, while death is an unavoidable fate, one should try to go out with a fight. Troy says that he knew Death had the upper hand in their battle, but that he nonetheless wanted to make his death as difficult as possible to achieve. Further, the **fence** can be read as a barrier to the inevitable onslaught of death. Troy mentions that the fence he builds is a way of keeping Death out of his life.

Gabriel, always thinking about judgment day, has perhaps just as strong an obsession with death as his brother. Gabriel's obsession, however, is more loud and noticeable because it's expressed in his manic, psychotic ideas about his supposed spiritual powers. Troy's obsession with death is perhaps just as strong, however, for in a way it sustains him: Troy's pride in having survived against all the odds—his father, intense poverty, personal failure—relies on death to fuel itself.

On the day of Troy's funeral, Gabriel declares that Troy has successfully entered the gates of heaven. While this declaration may not indicate the opinions of other characters, it nonetheless ends the play, and is the final word on Troy's death. Gabriel's proclamation therefore has both a punctuality and an ambivalence; the play ends with the gates of heaven opening onto and usurping Troy's fenced-off existence. Death ends the play by annihilating the in/out distinction effected by a fence, and Troy dies in an unfavorable status because of his adultery.

Wilson therefore seems to speak against Troy's view of death, and how this view informs his approach to life and the lives around him. If we take Troy to view death as a force that should be fought against at all costs, to the extent that one should give up on taking any risks (such as Cory's football ambitions, in his mind) and even sacrifice one's ability to give love and compassion to one's family members as a result of that fight, then Wilson seems to speak against this.

By having Troy die unsatisfied and in low moral standing, Wilson suggests a couple of things. First, with regard to Troy's adultery, he *did* take a risk—but one for himself, and which endangered his family, rather than a risk at least attempting to invest in his family (like letting Cory try out football and attend college, despite his uncertainty about its promise). Troy lets the pressure of death eat at him to such an extent that he seeks to find satisfaction in life (to defy and thwart that pressure) in an

extreme form, somewhere outside the space he's cultivated and fenced off for his family. Secondly, Troy is ultimately unhappy because of this decision to find satisfaction beyond his fence—he ruins his relationship with Rose, and Alberta dies because of the baby with which he impregnated her. This suggests that Troy's constant struggle to defy death and win out against it—or at least his specific methods of doing so—is something which ultimately fails, and which hurts everyone who's affected by that failure.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE FENCE

The fence that Rose asks Troy to build, and envisions as wrapping protectively around her family, can be read in a several ways. On one level, the division effected by the fence seems to echo the separation of people and social spaces central to the workings of segregation—an unjust practice pervading the time in which the play takes place. Yet, while Troy and Cory's construction of a border around their home may resonate with the racial divide plaguing the society it pictures, it's also an emblem of black courage and strength, and of the integrity of black lives and history. Rose yearns to fence-off and fence-in her family's lives and the bond connecting them from a racist world of white dominance—from a society bent on delegitimizing black life and casting it as second-class. The fence therefore also speaks to the psychological need Rose and many like her felt, and still feel, to preserve an inner, private life against the brunt of an outside world where that life is rejected and made to conform to the mechanisms of white power.

The fence also seems to serve as a figure for Troy's career, resembling the perimeter of a baseball stadium: the fence he strived, with his bat, to hit beyond. Despite Troy's talent, his skin color barred him from any chance of a steady career in the white-dominated world of professional baseball. The fence of Troy's career, therefore, was at once a marker of his skill whenever he hit a home run, as well as a border enclosing a world and a future he could never fully enter. Therefore, when Troy builds the fence for Rose, he's building his own limit, his own arena—a limit not imposed upon him by forces of discrimination out of his control.

While it's critical to read the fence as a symbol of race division and how it affects the Maxson family, the motivation to build it can also be read as stemming from Rose's sheer, maternal desire to protect and fortify her family. Additionally, Troy's efforts to wall-off his home resonate with his ongoing conflict with “**Mr. Death**.” By fortifying the perimeter of his home, Troy

gestures towards his desire to dam-up any lethal forces assailing him from the outside world.



“MR. DEATH”

Death appears as a personified figure in Troy’s fanciful tales about wrestling with death and buying furniture from the devil. Troy’s typically stubborn sense of manhood and strength largely derives from his relationship with death. Having beaten all the obstacles thrown at him in his early years and survived, Troy props up his sense of self-worth and accomplishment through personifying death into a tangible form he’s proactively and successfully fended off. Further, by rendering death or the forces of destruction into a person (the grim reaper and the devil), Troy gives the unpredictability and mystery of death a concrete form, and thereby attributes a kind of reason and discernible motive to the process of death. Death, for Troy, is therefore a force that *personally* tries to antagonize and destroy him. This personification provides a reason for the suffering of Troy’s past beyond its basis in racism, and the severe poverty into which it landed him; it gives a higher purpose to what, in reality, boils down to a corrupt society and a childhood made difficult by abusive and unloving parents. “Mr. Death,” therefore, resembles the **fence**, since its invention helps Troy fence-off the harsher reality that’s largely cheated him in life.

Troy speaks these lines to Bono, at the beginning of the play, as the two participate in one of their Friday night payday rituals of drink and conversation. Here, we see the firmness of Troy’s conviction in facing the inequality at his workplace, where only white men are hired as drivers, and black men only as the actual garbage collectors. This willingness to protest seems to suggest that standing up to everyday racism is a fundamental part of Troy’s character, since filing a complaint through his union could very well get him fired. Further, Troy’s deed attests to his extraordinary confidence in himself, since he’s presumably the first at his company to file such a complaint.

Though it’s clear that Troy is certainly a vocal opponent of white power and racist coercion, his primary motivation for filing his complaint seems to be self-gain—to simply attain, for himself, a job as a truck driver. Once he achieves this, he stops there—he doesn’t advocate for his fellow black workers. This speaks to the hypocrisy which runs like a crack through Troy’s character in many other forms throughout the play; though Troy is willing to defend the principle of equality in the name of himself, and though he does achieve some degree of it at work, he fails to defend it for those around him.

“I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain’t gonna let him get nowhere with that football. I told him when he first come to me with it. Now you come telling me he done went and got more tied up in it. He ought to go and get recruited in how to fix cars or something where he can make a living.”

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Jim Bono, Rose Maxson, Cory Maxson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Troy speaks these lines to Rose in the first scene of the first act, when he and Bono are engaging in one of their Friday night payday get-togethers. Rose enters their conversation for a bit, and informs Troy that Cory’s been recruited by a college football team.

Troy’s disdain for a career in sports stems from his experience playing baseball when he was younger. Despite being a very talented athlete, his hopes of playing professionally were cut short due to racial



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Plume edition of *Fences* published in 1986.

Act 1: Scene 1 Quotes

“I ain’t worried about them firing me. They gonna fire me cause I asked a question? That’s all I did. I went to Mr. Rand and asked him, “Why?” Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting? Told him, “what’s the matter, don’t I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck. That ain’t no paper job! Hell, anybody can drive a truck. How come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting?” He told me “take it to the union.” Well, hell, that’s what I done! Now they wanna come up with this pack of lies.”

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Jim Bono

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

discrimination—black players simply weren't given a chance in the major leagues, where skin color was favored over objective talent. Troy's opinion about what counts as a viable future for Cory, therefore, is shaped by his own past, by a different era in history than the one in which Cory grew up, where—though race relations are still overwhelmingly far from equal and just—there are more opportunities for young black men than there were in Troy's time. Troy, however, doesn't think this, and refuses to see it. He stays stuck to his 'outdated' view of society, insisting that pursuing sports will only bring Cory disappointment and an unstable lifestyle. To prevent this, Troy advocates—however stubbornly—that Cory pursue a standard trade that will earn him what he imagines would be a steadier, more dependable living. Thus, the conflict between Troy and Cory over football can be explained as a war between two drastically different views of history, society, and race relations.

☝ I wrestled with Death for three days and three nights and I'm standing here to tell you about it. . . . At the end of the third night we done weakened each other to where we can't hardly move. Death stood up, throwed on his robe. . . . had him a white robe with a hood on it. He throwed on that robe and went off to look for his sickle. Say, "I'll be back." Just like that. . . . I told him, say, "yeah, but . . . you gonna have to find me!" I wasn't no fool. I wasn't going looking for him. Death aint nothing to play with. And I know he's gonna get me. . . . But . . . as long as I keep up my vigilance. . . . he's gonna have to fight to get me. I ain't going easy.

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Rose Maxson, Jim Bono

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Troy speaks these lines to Bono and Rose, in the first scene of the first act, during the two men's Friday night ritual of drink and conversation. Rose has just scolded Troy for drinking so much, telling him that he's going to drink himself to death, and this has consequently inspired Troy to address the topic of death.


Here, Troy invokes his "Mr. Death," a mythical figure with which he's personified the abstract force of death. Troy's


frequent mentioning of Mr. Death—either in the form of the grim reaper or the devil—speaks to his tendency to tell tall tales about his life, and distort reality with fantasy. Though Troy busies himself in this passage with describing an elaborate wrestling match with the grim reaper (who is not wearing the traditional black, but rather a white robe and hood, perhaps in a reference to a member of the Ku Klux Klan), seeming to intend that his story be taken as a factual account of a real event, Rose translates fantasy into reality by explaining that Troy's tale actually refers to the time when he contracted pneumonia.

Troy's insistence that he will only go out with a fight, that he won't let death take him easily, reflects his hardened and toughened outlook on life itself—an outlook which he tries to instill in Cory. Always trying to remain "vigilant" and armored-up for the approach of this figment of his imagination—for this evil being who has a very personal gripe with him—Troy's treatment of his family is always tinged by this battle-ready mentality.

☝ You ain't seen no devil. I done told you that man ain't had nothing to do with the devil. Anything you can't understand, you want to call it the devil.

Related Characters: Rose Maxson (speaker), Lyons Maxson, Jim Bono, Troy Maxson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Rose speaks these lines in response to Troy's declaration that he's met the devil. It's the first scene of the first act, and Lyons has just come by to ask Troy if he can borrow some money.

Here, Rose's function as the voice of reason in her relationship with Troy becomes more apparent. Anything Troy can't understand, she claims, he wants to attribute to the workings of the devil—to "Mr. Death," Troy's personified figure of the abstract, impersonal force of death. Rose thereby offers an explanation for Troy's tendency to tell tall tales and spin fantasies as if they were true accounts of reality: rather than leaving things open to chance and the contingency of natural events (which make it impossible for anyone to successfully understand the reason behind

everything that happens to them in life), Troy would rather give an explanation—even if it means telling a lie. This points to a fundamental attribute of Troy’s psyche: he’s afraid of the unexplainable—of things he doesn’t know or totally understand. This perhaps explains the hardness to his personality—why he treats a new and changing society, like the one Cory inhabits, as if it were the old one in which he grew up, hence why he won’t allow Cory to play sports.

☝ You and me is two different people, Pop. . . . 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 don’t bother nobody. I just stay with my music cause that’s the only way I can find to live in the world. Otherwise there ain’t no telling what I might do. Now I don’t come criticizing you and how you live. I just come by to ask you for ten dollars. I don’t wanna hear all that about how I live.

Related Characters: Lyons Maxson (speaker), Troy Maxson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Lyons speaks these lines to Troy in the first scene of the first act, after he’s asked Troy if he can borrow ten dollars. Troy chastises Lyons for asking to borrow money, criticizing Lyons for pursuing a fast, carefree, and profitless lifestyle as a professional musician, when Lyons could very well go out and get a stable, steady-paying job doing some sort of trade instead.


But Lyons, in this passage, insists that he and Troy live in two different worlds: while Troy only emphasizes material wealth and stability, Lyons prioritizes feeling joy at what he does every day, and considers music to be the only thing which adequately fuels such joy. Though Troy may be a bit caught up in his definitions of what trades count as “proper” career options, he nonetheless has a point: Lyons is thirty-four, and still isn’t financially stable. It can certainly be argued, however, that Troy played a role in Lyons’s psychological development into someone who’s financially irresponsible—and who seeks joy and recognition in his creative work to a point that threatens his basic welfare—since Troy was in prison during Lyons’ entire upbringing. On the other hand, Lyons’s inability to successfully make a living out of music might also be attributable to the fact that, as August Wilson writes in Lyons’s character description, he’s more caught up in the image of being a musician than in music for its own sake.

Act 1: Scene 2 Quotes

☝ Jesus, be a fence all around me every day / Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way. / Jesus, be a fence all around me every day.

Related Characters: Rose Maxson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Rose sings at the beginning of the second scene of the first act, while she’s hanging clothes up to dry. Rose’s desire to be protected manifests, as it does in this song, through her request that Troy build a fence around their yard. For Rose, the fence embodies safety, as well as the capacity to keep her family together as a unit and set off from a dangerous outside world. Rose’s song seems to suggest that her longing for a fence also has a religious dimension—that the protection and definition of space, the definition of inside versus outside, and the togetherness of family versus outside forces of separation, have a spiritual significance. Though Rose’s wish comes true, and Troy builds a fence around their home, it actually comes to serve as a symbol more so of the Maxson family’s division than unity.

Act 1: Scene 3 Quotes

☝ If they got a white fellow sitting on the bench . . . you can bet your last dollar he can’t play. The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team. That’s why I don’t want you to get all tied up in them sports. Man on the team and what it get him? They got colored on the team and don’t use them. Same as not having them. All them teams the same.

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Cory Maxson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Troy speaks these lines to Cory, in the third scene of the first act, after Cory tells him that a college football recruiter is going to pay Troy a visit to get his signature, which would grant Cory permission to join the college team.

Troy severely disapproves of Cory’s ambition to play

football, believing that the world of sports hasn't changed since when he played baseball (with the hopes of becoming professional). Since Troy's hopes were cut short due to racial discrimination, and since he believes the status of race relations in sports hasn't evolved at all, he thinks that Cory's sports dreams are foolishly impractical, idealistic, and not rooted in social reality. It would make more sense, in Troy's mind, for Cory to go out and practice a standard trade, like auto-mechanics.

Troy's comment about benched white players not being able to play well follows from his premises that black players are always benched while whites are favored on the field, and that, in order for a black player to get time on the field, they have to be twice as good. If a white player is benched, therefore, they must be exceptionally unskilled.

☝ I don't care where he coming from. The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage.

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Cory Maxson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

This quote—spoken by Troy to Cory after Troy mentions that he's heard from Rose about Cory's recruitment to play college football—demonstrates that, perhaps on some fundamental level, Troy truly does intend only good things for his son, even though he often fails to show it. Troy, certainly not silent on the matter of white supremacy and racial discrimination, is firmly convinced—based on his experiences of discrimination when he tried to play professional baseball—that the world of sports will not be hospitable for his son, a young black male. And, while it's easy to pass Troy off as a pigheaded man who only wanted to make life for his son as difficult as his own has been, and to prevent Cory from excelling in ways he was never able to, it seems, here at least, that Troy genuinely thinks he's doing Cory a favor by standing in the way of his career in sports.

This speaks to the fact that August Wilson doesn't seem

benched on portraying Troy as, in-and-of-himself, a bad person—as a bad father whose parenting decisions aren't informed by any valid experiences. Rather, Wilson seems concerned with conveying Troy as an unfortunate byproduct of historical forces which have molded him to think about the world the way he does, and which were ultimately out of his control. Wilson is therefore able to show how the racism experienced by previous generations of black fathers informs the way they raise their children—it informs a father's vision of the society in which he'll raise his child, regardless if race relations have evolved and are now different than the view afforded by his outdated perspective. Thus racism from the past gets recycled, indirectly onto new generations, who must grapple with the dichotomy between their own vision of contemporary society and the less current vision of their parents.

☝ Like 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. . . . I go out of here every morning. . . . bust my butt. . . . putting up with them crackers every day. . . . cause I like you? You about the biggest fool I ever saw. . . . It's my job. It's my responsibility! . . . A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house. . . . sleep you in my bedclothes. . . . fill you belly up with my food. . . . cause you my son. . . . Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you! I owe a responsibility to you! . . . 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 owes me.

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Cory Maxson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 37-8

Explanation and Analysis

Troy speaks these lines to Cory in the third scene of the first act, after Cory asks Troy why he's never liked him as a son.

Troy's harshness and fundamental lack of any loving qualities as a father come to a pinnacle here. Troy insists that his duty as a father is simply a contractual one—that he's responsible out of sheer contractual obligation, like a job, to provide for Cory, hence why Troy compares their relationship to the one he shares with his boss, Mr. Rand. For Troy, his duty to provide for his son isn't born out of love, admiration, or any higher moral, emotional, or psychological forces. Fatherhood is not a duty or labor of love: it's just a basic labor which, as if decreed by some law,

he's required to do. Therefore, insofar as it's only Troy's obligation to meet certain requirements as a provider, he needn't go beyond them—he needn't do such things as actually treat his son with kindness, or show him compassion.

Troy's appeal to duty as the fundamental familial bond, as opposed to anything psychological (like love), shows how he views his relationship to his family in terms of the minimum amount of participation that's required of him. This narcissistic view is what allows him to go off, have an affair with Alberta, and not question his conscience.

☝ I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. You the only decent thing that ever happened to me. I wish him that. But I don't wish him a thing else from my life. I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports.

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Rose Maxson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis


Troy speaks these lines to Rose when she enters the yard after Troy spoke to Cory about his duty as a father. Cory's exited the yard to go to the A&P store, in an attempt to get his job back (which he gave away because of the time commitment required by football). Troy says this in response to Rose's comment that Cory is only trying to please Troy, to be like Troy, and that Troy should therefore ease up on his son.

We see here, once again, something of a decent, perhaps noble motivation behind Troy's approach to parenting Cory—behind such decisions as not allowing Cory to play college football. Troy just wants to prevent Cory from repeating his own life—a life of many hardships and struggles, one of which was his failed attempt to become a professional baseball player in the face of racial discrimination. Though Troy only seems to communicate with Cory in a harsh, angry tone, he explains here that he only wants to prevent his son from wasting his time pursuing a future—a career in sports—that's simply not accepting of black men.

Act 1: Scene 4 Quotes

☝ How he gonna leave with eleven kids? And where he gonna go? He ain't knew how to do nothing but farm. No, he was trapped and I think he knew it. But I'll say this for him . . . he felt a responsibility toward us. Maybe he ain't treated us the way I felt he should have . . . but without that responsibility he could have walked off and left us . . . made his own way.

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Lyons Maxson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Troy speaks these lines to Lyons in the fourth scene of the first act, when Lyons stops by to pay his father back the ten dollars he borrowed in the first scene of the play. Bono and Troy are both discussing their fathers.


What's most striking about Troy's description of his father, perhaps, is the fact that Troy's explanation to Cory about his duty as a father corresponds exactly with the sense of responsibility Troy attributes to his own dad. In telling Cory that he's not obligated, as a father, to like his son, but only to provide for him materially, Troy pretty much fits the mold of his own father. Like his own dad, Troy certainly doesn't treat his son the way Cory feels he should, but Troy nonetheless claims to feel responsible to provide for him in certain ways to a minimal extent. This similarity between Troy and his own father seems to highlight Wilson's motif about the recycling of past generations into the new. Troy's approach to being a father is informed by his own past; even though he largely disliked his father, Troy was inalterably molded by him, and his approach to parenting Cody is consequently affected by that molding.

Act 2: Scene 1 Quotes

☝ Some people build fences to keep people out . . . and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you.

Related Characters: Jim Bono (speaker), Troy Maxson, Cory Maxson

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 61



Explanation and Analysis

Bono speaks these lines to Troy and Cory in the first scene of the second act, while they're all working on the fence. Cory has just asked what the point of building the fence is in the first place.

Fully aware that Troy is having an affair with Alberta, Bono wants to evoke, with this statement, a realization in Troy about the gravity of what he's doing to Rose—that he's betraying his bond with an incredibly loving, good, and strong woman. As Troy's best friend, Bono surely knows that Troy's mind is prone to fantasy—Troy has believed that he can lie to Bono about being monogamous and make him believe it, when Bono has, multiple times throughout the play, told Troy that he's explicitly seen him interacting with Alberta in an adulterous way. By bypassing Troy's imaginary world of defense mechanisms against the truth of his actions, and getting Troy to realize he's forgotten about and pushed aside the love of his incredible wife, he can perhaps trigger in Troy a remembrance of when he was deeply in love with Rose—he can help Troy empathize with Rose in a way that will make him be ashamed of his actions with Alberta. This seems to be Bono's goal here.

☞ Rose, I done tried all my life to live decent . . . to live a clean . . . hard . . . useful life. I tried to be a good husband to you. In every way I knew how. Maybe I come into the world backwards, I don't know. But . . . you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate. You got to guard it closely . . . always looking for the curve-ball on the inside corner. You can't afford to let none get past you. You can't afford a call strike.

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Rose Maxson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Troy speaks these lines to Rose, in the first scene of the second act, after he's confessed to her about his affair and baby with Alberta. This is another instance where Troy's obsession with the imagery of baseball takes over his use of language. Here, particularly, it's apparent that—by his use of baseball metaphors to describe his moral character and ethical status as a man “born with two strikes” already against him—Troy's imagination bypasses actually dealing with the reality of his actions. Instead of discussing, explicitly, how he has betrayed his wife by sleeping with

another woman, Troy diverts from the actual content of his actions with metaphorical language that borders on meaninglessness. This is another example demonstrating Troy's difficulty which distinguishes his imagination from reality—from the real experiences of other people around him.

☞ We're not talking about baseball! We're talking about you going off to lay in bed with another woman . . . and then bring it home to me. That's what we're talking about. We ain't talking about no baseball.

Related Characters: Rose Maxson (speaker), Troy Maxson, Alberta

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Rose speaks these lines in response to the last quote, spoken by Troy. Once again, Rose proves herself to be the voice of reason when faced with Troy's excessively imaginative mind that frequently covers up truth with distracting, invented images. As soon as Troy, entangled in his unclear language about being born with “two strikes on you before you come to the plate,” tries desperately to divert Rose's attention from the concrete reality of his adultery, she refuses to give into his confused world of euphemisms and images. As the voice of reason, she rejects Troy's words, and insists that nothing in their conversation has anything to do with baseball—they're talking about Troy's betrayal, nothing else.

☞ I been standing with you! I been right here with you, Troy. I got a life too. I gave eighteen years of my life to stand in the same spot with you. Don't you think I ever wanted other things? Don't you think I had dreams and hopes? What about my life? What about me? Don't you think it ever crossed my mind to want to know other men? That I wanted to lay up somewhere and forget about my responsibilities? That I wanted someone to make me laugh so I could feel good? . . . I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn't the finest man in the world. . . . You always talking about what you give . . . and what you don't have to give. But you take too. You take . . . and don't even know nobody's giving!

Related Characters: Rose Maxson (speaker), Troy Maxson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis



Perhaps the most powerful moment of the entire play, Rose speaks these lines to Troy after he's confessed to his affair with Alberta.

This is the first time in the play when Rose's own voice—a voice which articulates her own feelings, hopes, opinions, desires and imagined fantasies—gets fully expressed. This is the first time that Rose expresses herself without any censorship, without any hesitation before Troy's excessive presence, his narcissistic occupation of space. Here, Rose affirms that she has dreams and longings of her own, even though Troy addresses and talks to her as if she didn't have any. She affirms that she has a mind and imagination and needs of her own, and that she certainly hasn't been perfectly content, over the past eighteen years with Troy, with sacrificing nearly all her own desires just to be with him, while Troy constantly refused to acknowledge the extent to which Rose gave of herself.

While Troy often rambles about fantasies and figments of his imagination, and while Rose usually serves as the voice of reason, here she actually gives in to her own sense of imagination—her connection to her own dreams—and expresses it face-to-face with Troy. Yet, unlike Troy, she expresses her feelings with maturity and clarity; she isn't narcissistically absorbed in her own created imagery.

☝ I'm gonna tell you what your mistake was. See . . . you swung at the ball and didn't hit it. That's strike one. See, you in the batter's box now. You swung and you missed. That's strike one. Don't you strike out.

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Cory Maxson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Troy speaks this to Cory in the first scene of the second act. Troy has just confessed to Rose about his affair with Alberta and the baby they're going to have; after they argue for a while, Troy grabs Rose by the arm, and Rose tells Troy that he's hurting her. Cory then enters the scene, and pushes Troy off from Rose—this is when Troy warns Cory that he's


had “strike one.” Troy uses this metaphor about “strikes,” a term borrowed from baseball, in order to describe whenever Cory has severely insulted him.


The fact that Troy uses this metaphor in such a serious manner—in a moment of real anger and confrontation—suggests that he associates more than a bit of literary flair with its usage. “Striking out” has a real, visceral meaning for Troy, who conceives of his relationship with Cory as actually being structured like a baseball player's turn at the batter's box. This demonstrates just how fundamentally Troy's experience with baseball has shaped his imagination—and we already know that he has difficulty distinguishing his imagination from reality. Troy's repeated use of this metaphor to name events where Cory has crossed the line in his role as a son therefore shows how Troy's psyche is caught up in such imagery, much like Gabriel is caught up in images of judgement day and hellhounds. This similarity between the two brothers suggests that Troy's imagination and obsession with certain images and figures—like Mr. Death—isn't all that different from his mentally ill brother. In a way, therefore, we can read Troy's mind as a victim of trauma—the hardships and racism faced in his past—much like Gabriel's brain suffers from a traumatic injury.

Act 2: Scene 4 Quotes

☝ I'm coming in and everybody's going out...

Related Characters: Troy Maxson (speaker), Rose Maxson, Cory Maxson, Lyons Maxson, Raynell

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Troy speaks this line in the fourth scene of the second act. Lyons has just stopped by the Maxson house to drop off some money for Troy, who's not yet there, and Rose tells him to put it on the table. As he leaves, Cory enters the yard; they talk briefly (Lyons apologizes for missing Cory's high school graduation), and Lyons exits. Then, Troy enters the yard; as he approaches the steps to the house, Rose exits the house with Raynell, carrying a cake, and Troy says this line.


Though short and succinct, this is perhaps one of the most significant quotes of the entire play. It not only signals that

Troy is starting to realize the division, the rift opening between him and his family, but also hints at the failure of the fence to keep the Maxson family together as one solid unit. While one goal of the fence—at least Rose’s intended goal—was to protect her family and enclose them in a space of their own, this ambition has utterly failed in the face of Troy’s betrayal of Rose. The fence speaks more to division and separation than unity or togetherness; it serves as a fault line with which to reference not some divide between the family and the world, but a divisive crack that runs between the family and itself.

Act 2: Scene 5 Quotes

☛☛ The whole time I was growing up . . . living in his house . . . Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere. It weighed on you and sunk into your flesh. It would wrap around you and lay there until you couldn’t tell which one was you anymore. That shadow digging in your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you. Everywhere I looked, Troy Maxson was staring back at me . . . I’m just saying I’ve got to find a way to get rid of the shadow, Mama.

Related Characters: Cory Maxson (speaker), Rose Maxson, Troy Maxson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 96-7

Explanation and Analysis

Cory speaks these lines to Rose in the last scene of the play, at the Maxson household before Troy’s funeral. Cory’s just arrived: he hasn’t been home presumably in years, having joined the marines. He’s just told Rose that he doesn’t intend to attend Troy’s funeral, and she argues that it would be wrong to miss his father’s funeral.

Cory’s description of Troy as a shadow that, upon wrapping around him, would mix itself up with him to the extent that he couldn’t distinguish himself from it, portrays Troy as an invasive force of malice that distorted Cory’s sense of self. Trying to steer clear and avoid his father as a child, Cory, it seems, ultimately found it impossible to escape Troy, who had the ability to infiltrate Cory’s psyche with a non-corporeal weight, which bogged his personality down to the extent that its edges couldn’t be discerned—Cory couldn’t tell where his own personality started or ended.

This inability to distinguish between the inside and outside of Cory’s persona hints at the function of the fence at the core of the play. As a divider that creates a separation in space between an interior and an exterior, the fence defined the Maxson household as a discernible group against the outside world. Ironically, even though Cory was instrumental in building the fence, it seems like it took him a very long time—until after he left home—to build such a fence in his mind, and begin to be able to tell himself apart from the shadow of his father.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1: SCENE 1

August Wilson's written introduction to the first scene informs us that the play takes place in 1957, and that Troy is fifty-three years old. Having a conversation, he and Bono enter the yard outside Troy's house. Wilson writes that, of the two friends, Bono is the "follower," and that his dedication to their over thirty-year friendship is based on his respect for Troy's honesty, work ethic, and strength—all things Bono wants to embody himself. Further, we learn that it's Friday night—payday—the one night when, weekly, the two friends get together to drink and converse. Wilson writes that Troy typically talks the most and, though he can be quite vulgar, he sometimes becomes highly profound. Wilson also reveals that the two work as garbage collectors. Wilson explicitly describes Troy as being a black man, and we get the sense that Bono is as well.

The play begins by Bono accusing Troy of lying. Troy is telling a story about a black man—Troy actually refers to him as a "nigger"—who, when he was carrying a watermelon beneath his shirt, was questioned about the watermelon by a white man, Mr. Rand. But the man carrying the watermelon denied having a watermelon on him, and, in response, Troy says that Mr. Rand said nothing, figuring "if the nigger too dumb to know he carrying a watermelon, he wasn't gonna get much sense out of him." Troy claims that the man carrying the watermelon was "afraid to let the white man see him carry it home."

Troy and Bono's conversation continues, and Bono says that the same man who was carrying the watermelon had come up to him and said that Troy was going to "get us fired." Bono told him to go away, and the man called Troy a "troublemaker." Troy implies that the man was mad because he saw a union representative (likely for the black garbage collectors) talking to Mr. Rand (Troy and his fellow collectors' boss). As Troy and Bono talk, we learn that Troy filed a complaint with Mr. Rand through the union about the fact that all the garbage-truck-driving positions are filled by white men, while black men are only assigned to carry garbage. Troy says he wants the owners of the business to give everyone the chance to be a truck driver.

Already, Wilson gives us a feel for the often excessively large nature of Troy's presence. As in most of his relationships, Troy takes up most of the space of his friendship with Bono—and Bono willingly accepts this, viewing Troy as worthy of his devotion. Yet, ironically, Wilson tells us that Bono values Troy for his honesty, when this is precisely the quality he seems to fundamentally lack, as we see later in the play, when it's revealed that Troy has an affair with Alberta. Bono perhaps sees in Troy something that he's really not—but rather the ideal personality which Bono wished he himself had.



Here, we see how hate speech used against black people is used by people like Troy—a black man—to describe other people of color. This shows how racism influences Troy's very language, despite him also being oppressed by it. Further, Troy's story about the man carrying the watermelon exposes an instance, even if it's not fully explained, of a black man's fear and nervousness before the authoritative gaze of a white man.



The man who was carrying the watermelon is afraid that Troy's complaint with the commissioner's office at his workplace is going to get all of the black workers "fixed," or fired—this shows how not every person of color working there shares Troy's sense of confidence and purposefulness in protesting racial injustice. Further, the fact that Troy is willing to do such a thing—possibly putting his job on the line—shows how seemingly devoted he is to asserting himself and struggling for racial equality and equal opportunity in the workplace.



The conversation then shifts to discussing a woman named Alberta. Bono asks Troy how he thinks one of their fellow co-workers is “making out” with Alberta, meaning if he’s succeeded in having sex with her. Troy says their coworker is just as (un)successful as Bono and him—that he’s not had sex with her at all. Bono accuses Troy of eyeing Alberta more than other women, and of buying her a couple of drinks. Troy says he was just being polite. Troy gets Bono to admit that, ever since Troy married his wife Rose, he’s never chased after women. Still, Bono says that he’s seen Troy walking around Alberta’s house more than once. Troy says that, just because he’s been around there, it doesn’t mean anything. Bono asks where Alberta’s from, and Troy says Tallahassee. They both comment on how attractive they find her physique.

As the two men continue to crudely discuss Alberta’s body, Rose enters from inside the house, walking onto the porch where Troy and Bono are seated. August Wilson writes a note in the script describing Rose as ten years younger than Troy, and having a devotion for Troy based on how she thinks her life would be without him: fraught with abusive men and their babies, partying and being on the streets, the Church, or being alone and frustrated. Wilson writes that Rose admires Troy’s spirit while either ignoring or forgiving his flaws, adding that she only recognizes some of them. Further, he writes that, while Rose doesn’t drink alcohol, she plays an important role in these Friday night “rituals” between Troy and Bono.

Rose asks the two men what they’re talking about, and Troy responds by saying that Rose shouldn’t concern herself, since it’s “men talk.” After embarrassing Rose by implying, in front of Bono, that he’s going to have sex with her later in the evening, Troy talks about when he first met Rose. He says that he told Rose he didn’t want to marry her, but just to be her “man,” and that Rose responded by saying that, if Troy wasn’t the marrying type, he should get out of her way so the marrying type could find her. Troy says that, when he returned to talk with Rose, he agreed to marry, but told her he was going to put a rooster in the backyard to act as an alarm system for strangers (other men) coming into their house. Troy says that, while he could watch the front door on his own, he was worried about the back door. However, when they first got married, he says, they didn’t even have a yard.

Here, we get the sense for the first time that Bono is suspicious of Troy’s fidelity to Rose. While Bono is usually passive in conversation with Troy, here he takes charge, and fully persists in pursuing his point, despite Troy’s attempt to deflect it. Bono doesn’t let up, and says he’s seen with his own eyes Troy’s misdeeds—that he’s seen Troy on Alberta’s property. Even though it seems like Bono has caught Troy red-handed, Troy still thinks he can argue his way out. This is a testament to Troy’s distorted sense of reality: he thinks he can cover up what’s blatantly true with the lies he weaves in his head.



Rose’s entrance into the scene represents the influx of a totally different energy than that displayed by Troy and Bono. Rose embodies a maternal gentleness and compassion, a strong character and sense of fortitude, and a solid relationship with truth and reality—which often clashes with Troy’s storytelling. The fact that Wilson describes Rose’s devotion to Troy as being based on what her life would be like without him suggests that, in marrying him, she’s largely “settled,” compromising on her own dreams in order to have the safety of a stable marriage.



Troy’s treatment of Rose, implying that she has no place in his and Bono’s “men talk” and making lewd sexual innuendos, suggests that there’s a strict male-female divide in the power dynamics between the two (and in Troy’s worldview in general). Troy feels he has the right to tell his wife to butt out of conversation where a woman has no place, and to discuss having sex with her in front of other people, without her permission. Further, Troy’s mentioning of the rooster alarm system suggests his sense of possessiveness over Rose; this shows his hypocrisy, as he ultimately decides to sleep with another woman.



Bono chimes in and says that he and his wife Lucille's first house also wasn't in the best condition, saying that their outhouse let off a foul stench during the winter months whenever there was a breeze. Bono says that he wonders why he and Lucille remained in that house for "six long years," but adds that he didn't know he could do any better, and thought that "only white folks had inside toilets and things." Rose replies by saying that a lot of people don't know that they could be doing better than their current living situation.

Rose says that Cory has been recruited by a college football team, but Troy says that he doesn't want his son getting involved in football, since "the white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with" it. He then says that Cory should go get recruited in a trade where he can make a proper living, like being an auto-mechanic. Bono says that, if Cory is anything like his dad, Troy, then he's going to be good at sports. He claims that the only two men who have played baseball as well as Troy are Babe Ruth and Josh Gibson—that they're the only two men who have hit more home runs than Troy. Rose adds that "times have changed" since Troy played baseball—"that was before the war," she says, and times have changed since then. Troy asks how they've changed, and Rose answers that "they got lots of colored boys playing ball now."

Troy then explains that, when he played baseball, his batting average was significantly higher than Seikirk, a player for the Yankees, and he implies that Seikirk enjoyed commercial success as a professional player only because he was white, while Troy, a better player, wasn't hired to play because he was black.

Rose tells Troy that he's going to drink himself to death, and Troy responds by saying "death ain't nothing," comparing it to a fastball (a kind of pitch in baseball) that's easy to knock out of the park. Rose then says that she doesn't understand why Troy wants to talk about death. Troy then tells Rose that she's the one who brought death up in the conversation, and says that he's not worried about death: "I done seen him," he says, "I done wrestled with him." Troy says that he asked "Mr. Death" what he wanted, and looked him "dead in the eye," without any fear. Rose then gives Troy's story a context in real life by mentioning that he had pneumonia. Troy continues, saying that, right before he fought Death, he grabbed Death's sickle and threw it as far as he could, and then they wrestled for three days and three nights. Troy concludes that Death had grown tired and given up, vowing to return someday for him. Troy says that, as long as he can keep up his strength, he'll try to make it as difficult as possible for Death to take him.

Bono's comment about not knowing he was capable of acquiring better living conditions for himself and his wife—that only white folks could afford to have indoor plumbing and other such amenities—underscores the economic limitations felt by and imposed upon black people, and the way those limitations inform how people like Bono view their own potential for upward mobility.



Here, Troy's outdated perspective on race relations makes its first appearance; though it's outdated, his view on race certainly isn't based on invalid premises, since he grew up in a different time with different circumstances, and experienced discrimination in the sports world himself. Still, Troy is unwilling to adapt his views and heed Rose's suggestion that, indeed, times have changed and that opportunities for black players in the world of professional sports have opened up; instead of opening up his mind, Troy remains stubbornly fixed on the idea that Cory should enter a "proper" trade like auto-mechanics.



Troy's wariness about Cory trying to play football professionally is grounded in his own experience of racial discrimination in the world of professional baseball—where, at the time, skin color counted more than actual talent.



Troy's tall tale about Mr. Death is the first glimpse we get at his tendency to fantasize and stretch the truth—and how this contrasts with Rose's insistence that he tell what really happened, i.e., that he had simply contracted pneumonia. This tendency to spin elaborate, fantastical stories shows another element of Troy's hypocrisy: while he's unwilling to let his son Cory pursue his dreams of football, deeming them as unrealistic, he's perfectly willing to dream up lies and unrealities in his own mind. Further, Troy's comment about standing up to Death—insisting that he'll make it as difficult as possible for Death to take him—reveals the toughened and hardened way he approaches living in general.



Lyons enters the scene, and Wilson writes a note in the script describing him as thirty-four years old, a son by Troy's previous marriage, and wearing trendy clothing. Wilson adds that, though Lyons thinks of himself as a musician, he's more caught up in the *idea* of being a musician than in "the actual practice of the music." Lyons, he writes, has come to borrow money from Troy, and he is unsure how much his exotic lifestyle will be criticized and ridiculed, even though he's certain that he'll be successful.

Lyons rejects Rose's invitation that he stay for dinner, saying that he found himself in the neighborhood and thought he'd stop by for a moment. Troy, however, says that Lyons just came by because he knew it was his father's payday. "Since you mentioned it," Lyons then says to Troy, "let me have ten dollars," promising to pay Troy back. But Troy says he'd rather die playing blackjack with the **devil** than give Lyons ten dollars.

Troy then claims to have seen the **devil**, saying that the devil sold him furniture when he couldn't get enough credit. The devil, appearing at his doorstep in the form of a white man, promised to give Troy all the credit he wanted if he'd pay interest on it. Troy says that he asked for three rooms worth of furniture and that he told the devil to charge whatever he wanted. He concludes that he's sent the devil 10 dollars every month for fifteen years; even though Troy's probably paid off the interest by now, he says he's afraid to stop paying. Rose says Troy's lying, and that he got the furniture from a local vendor.

Lyons asks Troy again for ten dollars, and Troy hassles him, asking him why he isn't working. Lyons tells Troy that he can't find a decent job as a musician, and Troy says that he could get his son a job as a garbage collector, but Lyons says that that isn't the job for him. Troy then claims that the reason *he* has money and Lyons doesn't is because he isn't living "the fast life" trying to play music. Lyons replies that he stays with music because it gets him out of bed in the morning—it's his passion—and that he and Troy are two very different people. Finally, Rose convinces Troy to give Lyons the money, and Lyons leaves shortly after. Troy says to Rose and Bono that he doesn't understand why his son doesn't go out and get a decent job and take care of "that woman he got"—Bonnie, Lyons's girlfriend.

The first scene ends with Troy telling Bono that he loves Rose "so much it hurts," and that he "done run out of ways of loving her," so he has to rely on the "basics." He tells Bono not to come by his house Monday morning because he's "still gonna be stroking"—having sex with Rose.

We get the sense, just from Wilson's description, that Lyons view the world from a very different perspective than Troy, and that Troy likely has great disdain for Lyons' choice of profession, since playing music is unlikely to rank among Troy's list of 'proper' trades. Further, Lyons' infatuation with the image of being a musician suggests that maybe there is something superfluous about his professional ambitions.



Lyons' lack of financial stability at the age of thirty-four highlights both the difficulty of his profession and also perhaps his unwillingness to pursue other options of making money in order to support himself as a musician—fixated on music, he refuses to be more practical about his finances.



More of Troy's fanciful storytelling emerges here, and we can see that his obsession with a figure of death—in the form of the grim reaper or the devil—is reoccurring. Once again, Troy's recourse to spinning tall tales as a way of explaining his past gets reprimanded by Rose, who insists that Troy's diversions from the truth always be corrected—she grounds his story in reality by explaining the real facts.



Here, Troy isn't being exactly out of line when he criticizes Lyons' lifestyle—Lyons is thirty-four, after all, and still relies on Troy financially, and further, he could very well get himself out of his problems if he'd find at least a part-time job and earn a supplemental income to support his music. Lyons' claim that he and Troy are two vastly different people is poignant: it emphasizes the fact that, not only do the two have different views on what matters most in life, but that they differ in some very fundamental way, down to their very natures—we can partly read this difference as the distinct time periods in which they grew up.



Troy's comment about having run out of ways of loving Rose seems to foreshadow the news we'll later discover: that he's been having an affair.



ACT 1: SCENE 2

The second scene begins the next morning; Rose is hanging clothes, and singing a song about Jesus protecting her: “Jesus, be a **fence** all around me every day.” Troy enters the scene, and Rose tells him how Ms. Pearl won a dollar on the local lottery the other day. Troy says that the lottery is a waste of money, saying that he’d be rich if he “had all the money niggers . . . throw away on numbers for one week.” Rose replies by saying that sometimes good things result from playing the lottery, and mentions a man named Pope who was able to buy himself a restaurant with his winnings. Troy tells Rose that Pope, a black man, didn’t want any people of color to enter his restaurant. He says he saw a white man order a bowl of stew there, claiming that Pope “picked all the meat out the pot for him.” He calls Pope a fool.

Troy then asks where Cory is, and Rose says he’s at football practice. This upsets Troy, since Cory hadn’t finished his chores before going to practice, but Rose says that Cory had to leave early, since his coach wanted to get in some extra practice. Troy accuses Cory of never working a “lick of work” in his life. As Troy and Rose bicker, Troy’s brother, Gabriel, comes by. Wilson writes a note in the script describing Gabriel: he’s seven years younger than Troy, and has a metal plate in his head—he was injured in WWII. As a result, Gabriel is delusional, and believes himself to be the Archangel Gabriel. He carries a basket of fruit and vegetables which he tries to sell.

Gabriel enters the scene singing a song about plums he has for sale. Not seeing any plums in Gabriel’s basket, Rose asks him where they are, and Gabriel says that he will have some tomorrow, since he put in a big order to have enough for “St. Peter and everybody.” Gabriel says that Troy is mad at him, thinking that his recent decision to move out and get his own place has upset his brother. Troy says he’s not mad at all, and Gabriel explains that the only reason he moved was to get out of Troy’s hair. When Rose asks Gabriel if he wants any breakfast, he asks for biscuits, recounting how he and St. Peter used to eat biscuits every morning before the gates of judgment were opened. Further, Gabriel says that St. Peter has Troy and Rose’s names in “the book.” He clarifies that, because he died and went to heaven, his own name isn’t in the book. Gabriel then leaves, singing a song about how people “better get ready for the judgment.”

Troy’s condemnation of Rose’s decision to play the lottery is another instance of hypocrisy—whereas Troy thinks it’s perfectly fine that he dream about his life and tell tall tales, behaving in a completely irrational manner, he scolds Rose for engaging in behavior that, though perhaps financially risky, isn’t nearly as divorced from reality, and actually bears some small chance of success. Further, his criticism of Pope further emphasizes Troy’s commitment to racial justice—by picking out Pope as an example of a black person catering to white power, Troy demonstrates his unwillingness to let everyday acts of inequality pass him by.



Troy’s anger over Cory’s desire to play football continues to fester, and he unreasonably accuses his son of never working—of never having put any exerted effort into anything—in his life, all because Cory is pursuing a cause with which Troy disagrees. This speaks to the sensitivity of Troy’s temper. Gabriel’s entrance into the play will add a bit of whimsy (albeit tragic in its source) to counter the seriousness and drama of Troy’s world.



Gabriel’s propensity for spinning fantasies offers a match for Troy’s tendency to tell tall tales—while Gabriel speaks about St. Peter, Troy speaks about the grim reaper or the devil. Further, while Gabriel has a neurological defect that explains his delusions, Troy doesn’t—this at least makes us consider that Troy’s fantasizing isn’t really all that different from Gabriel’s, and that Gabriel isn’t really as deluded as he might seem. Gabriel’s fixation on the day of judgment will grow to have profound significance in the play, as it becomes intimately connected with Troy’s eventual death.



Rose re-enters the yard from the house, and implies to Troy that Gabriel should go back to the hospital. But Troy thinks it would be cruel to lock Gabriel up after all Gabriel went through during the war. He also feels guilty for assuming ownership of the three thousand dollars with which the army compensated Gabriel for his injury. Troy claims that the only reason he has a house is because of Gabriel's compensation. Rose, however, says that Gabriel was in no condition to manage his money, and that Troy has taken great care of his brother—she therefore tells Troy that he shouldn't feel guilty. Troy recognizes all of this, but says he's just stating the facts: if Gabriel didn't have a metal plate in his head, he wouldn't have a house. The scene ends after Troy tells Rose that he's heading to a bar to listen to the ball game, saying he'll work on the **fence** when he gets back.

Troy's guilt over using Gabriel's money to pay for his house, and his empathy for Gabriel's condition and right to live freely after his sacrifices in the war display a hint of compassion which Troy's actions later in the play will arguably undermine. While Troy clearly rejects Rose's proposal to institutionalize Gabriel now, and while he feels guilt over taking his money (now), he'll later send Gabriel off to the hospital and take even more of his money.



ACT 1: SCENE 3

Scene three occurs four hours later; Rose is taking down the clothes she was hanging up at the beginning of the second scene, and Cory enters the yard with his football equipment. Rose tells Cory that his father was angry upon finding out that he hadn't finished his chores before practice, and that he wouldn't be around to help Troy with building the **fence**. Rose then tells Cory to start on his chores, and he enters the house. Troy then enters the scene, and Rose asks him what the score of the baseball game was, but Troy brushes the question off, asking "What I care about the game?" He then tries to kiss Rose, but she resists him, irritated that Troy, so it seems, didn't go to listen to the game at all, blowing off building the fence for no good reason. Troy then chases Rose around, trying to land a kiss on her.

Yet again, Troy has been angered by Cory for reasons pertaining to his commitment to football; while Cory works hard at and dedicates himself to the sport—which has a promising future in store for him—all Troy seems to care about is whether or not Cory gets his small, menial chores done, football not being a valid excuse. Further, when Troy enters the yard and appears to have not gone to listen to the game, we can infer that Bono's suspicions about Troy's fidelity are justified: where, after all, did Troy go? Alberta's, likely.



Angry that Cory wasn't around earlier to help him build the **fence**, Troy yells at him, summoning him to the yard. He reprimands Cory for not finishing his chores before heading to practice, and then puts him to work cutting boards for the fence. After a long pause, Cory asks his father why he doesn't buy a television. Troy says he doesn't see the point in owning one, but after Cory explains that a TV would allow them to watch the World Series, Troy asks how much one costs. Cory explains that a TV costs 200 dollars, saying that it isn't much money. Troy thinks just the opposite: he tells Cory that it'll cost 246 dollars to re-tar their roof before the winter. Cory replies that he'd rather buy a TV, and fix the roof himself whenever it started to leak. Troy asks him where he intends to get the money, but Cory suggests that his father has plenty of money. Troy, however, claims to only have 72 dollars and 73 cents in his bankbook. Finally, the two make a deal, and Troy agrees to pay 100 dollars towards the TV if Cory can come up with his own 100 dollars.

Troy and Cory's interactions are always awkward and heated; they never seem to share a moment of agreement or love proper to a healthy father-son bond. Troy constantly scolds Cory and has no real interest in the daily events of Cory's life or in the activities which inspire or fascinate him. Troy's dialogue with Cory principally consists in disciplining him, which largely amounts to cutting him down. Still, Cory's desire for his father to buy a T.V. does demonstrate a fundamental disconnect between his and his father's view of their family's economic situation, a disconnect which Troy perhaps isn't unjustified in trying to get Cory to acknowledge. Further, Troy's willingness to meet Cory halfway for the money shows that he's willing to reach out and compromise with his son at least on some level.



After Cory returns to cutting the boards, he mentions that the Pirates won the baseball game that day, making five wins in a row. Troy, however, says that he's not thinking about the Pirates, since they have an all-white team. He claims that the Pirates only play a Puerto Rican boy on the team half the time, but that he could really be something if they'd just give him the chance. Cory disagrees, saying that the Puerto Rican player has plenty of chances to play, but Troy means regular play at every game. Cory counters his father, saying that the Pirates have some white guys who also don't play every day, and Troy comments that, if a white man is sitting on the bench, you can be certain he's not a good player, since black players "have to be twice as good" to get on the team. He says that this is the reason why he doesn't want Cory to get all entangled in the sports world.

Troy then says that Rose informed him about Cory's recruitment. Cory explains that a recruiter will be coming by to speak with Troy and have him sign papers granting Cory permission to play college football. Troy bickers with Cory, insisting that he keep working at the A&P (a local grocery store), but Cory says he got his boss, Mr. Stawicki, to hold his job until the football season ends. Troy insists that there's no future for Cory, as a black male, in professional sports, and that he should learn a trade like fixing cars or building houses, so that he can have something no one can take away from him. When Troy demands that Cory keep working during the season, Cory says that Stawicki has already filled his position. Annoyed by this, Troy calls Cory a fool, and orders him to get his job back—if Cory isn't working, Troy says, then he can't play football.

Alarmed by his father's harshness, Cory asks Troy why he never liked him as a son. Troy demeans this question, saying that there's no law demanding that he love Cory. Troy asks Cory whether or not he's provided food, clothes, and shelter, and after Cory answers "yessir," Troy says that the reason he does all those things for Cory has nothing to do with liking him—rather, it's just his job, his responsibility. Troy adds that "liking your black ass wasn't part of the bargain." Troy then compares his relationship with his son to his relationship to Mr. Rand, saying that Rand doesn't pay Troy because he likes him, but rather because he's obligated to. After Troy tells him to get out of his face, Cory leaves and heads to the A&P.

Here, the disconnect between Cory and Troy's views of race relations comes to the fore. While Troy bases his view of race relations in the world of professional sports on his own experiences in the past—an era less progressive than the one in which Cory has grown up (though Cory's is far from perfect), and in which Troy himself was discriminated against as a black baseball player—Cory sees the world of sports as much more inclusive. Cory doesn't view his future as restricted by racist white power in the way that his father does.



Troy and Cory's different perspectives on race, as well as what counts as a proper profession, continue to collide. While Cory works hard at and displays a genuine dedication towards football, this simply isn't enough for Troy, who views his son's pursuits in football as frivolous, thinking that work at the local grocery store is a more valuable use of his time, even though football could pave his son's path towards a higher education. Troy doesn't care about any of that, and is concerned with Cory's immediate ability to make a steady income, and finds it foolish that his son should give such a thing up for a future in sports.



Once again, Troy's harsh coldness as a father surfaces, and we see yet another awkward and confrontational encounter between the two, devoid of any warmth or love that would characterize a healthy father-son bond. Troy utterly rejects love as something necessary to his relationship with his son, citing responsibility—duty—as the sole link which relates him to his son: a relationship born out of contractual obligation and necessity, and not out of any higher moral, emotional, or psychological forces.



Rose enters the yard, having been listening to Troy and Cory's conversation from behind the screen door on the porch. She asks Troy why he won't let Cory play football, and Troy exclaims: "I don't want him to be like me!" He tells Rose that she's the only decent thing that's ever happened to him, and that he wishes Cory will someday find a woman like her, but he wishes nothing else from his life upon his son, and that he decided when Cory was born that he would not get involved in sports, after what happened to Troy. With strong conviction, he's assured that sports will only bring his son harm; when Rose tries to tell him that the world has changed from Troy's youth, Troy diverts from her comment, and just says that he's done everything he could for his family, and that he can't give anything else. He exits into the house.

Here, we see that Troy perhaps really does only mean to do his son some good—that he has Cory's best interests in mind when he downplays football as a future that isn't viable for a young black man. Yet, it still seems like Troy is fundamentally wrong in his stubbornness, and his refusal to give up his outdated perception of race relations in the world of professional sports. It therefore seems that August Wilson is more interested in portraying Troy's views as products of historically racist forces—of racism that has shaped his mind—than as someone who, in-and-of-himself, is a force of anger wanting to hold his son back from a good future.



ACT 1: SCENE 4

The fourth scene takes place two weeks after the third, on another Friday, when Troy and Bono engage in their payday ritual of drink and conversation. It begins as Cory gets a call from a teammate, who asks him if he can borrow some cleats. From within the house Rose calls for Cory, who is standing in the doorway on the porch, telling him not to leave. Cory hangs up and tells Rose he needs to go to his team's game, but Rose insists that he clean his room first, so Troy won't see it when he gets home. With a certain confidence, Cory continues to leave, telling Rose he'll clean his room when he gets back.

Cory displays a sense of drive and autonomy that seems distinctly confident and uniquely mature, even if it's a bit disrespectful of Rose's kind requests that he clean his room. Still, Cory's determination to get to the football game on time—regardless if this means postponing cleaning his bedroom—demonstrates that he is, on some fundamental level, committed to his team and to the sport: a commitment which suggests a kind of maturity itself.



After Cory leaves, Rose goes back into the house, and Troy and Bono enter the yard. Troy is carrying a bottle of alcohol, and they're talking about Mr. Rand. Bono says he couldn't believe the look on Rand's face, earlier that day, when he told Troy something (that he'd been hired as a truck driver).

Once again, Bono and Troy engage in their weekly ritual of drink (total drunkenness, for Troy) and conversation (dominated by Troy). The success of Troy's complaint about the lack of black truck drivers shows Troy's bravery and dedication to social justice, despite his other flaws.



Troy claims that Rand thought the office where he filed his complaint would simply fire Troy, based on Rand's expression as he delivered him the good news. Troy calls out for Rose several times, and when she enters the scene she asks Troy what the result of his complaint was. Troy dismisses her question, telling her that she's supposed to come to him when he calls, but she firmly replies that she's not a dog. Her remark reminds him of a dog he once had, named "Blue," and he starts singing a song about him which his father made up. Rose tells Troy that no one wants to hear that song, but he continues, and eventually announces the news about his new position, which pleases Rose.

Troy's comment about Rand—that he thought Rand anticipated firing Troy—speaks to the willingness of Troy to lay his livelihood on the line for the right cause, to risk his job for his higher principles: principles which he actually doesn't see as "higher," but rather as integral to his everyday experience. Further, Troy's continued debasement of Rose—this time treating her like a dog—shows just how deep and constant is his refusal to acknowledge her as an equal participant in their relationship.



Lyons enters the scene, and Troy is surprised to see him, since he thought Lyons had been jailed after reading that one of the clubs he frequents was raided for gambling. Lyons defends himself, saying that he doesn't gamble, and that he only attends that club to play music with his band. Bono then lets Lyons know about his father's new job, adding that all Troy will have to do is sit and read the newspaper. Lyons says his father's illiteracy will get in the way of his job, if that's the case—but Bono says there's a bigger problem: Troy can't drive, and doesn't have a license.

Lyons then reaches into his pocket, saying "Look here, Pop," and Troy thinks he's going to ask to borrow more money. But Lyons takes out ten dollars, intending to keep his promise from the first scene and pay his father back. Troy downplays Lyons's sincerity, telling him to just keep the money for the next time he wants to borrow some. Rose argues with Troy, telling him to take the money, and Lyons eventually hands it to her.

Gabriel then comes by, singing his usual song about preparing for Judgment Day. He gives Rose a flower—a rose—and says he's been chasing hellhounds. Lyons commends him, saying that someone has to chase them, and Gabe (Gabriel) says that, even though the **devil** is strong, he has his trusty trumpet ready for the judgment time. When Lyons asks him if he's waiting for the Battle of Armageddon, Gabe replies that it's not going to be much of a battle when God starts using his "Judgment sword."

As Lyons goes to leave, Gabe says Troy is mad at him, and Lyons asks Troy why. Rose explains that, because Gabe moved out of Troy's house to have his own place (paying rent to Miss Pearl), he thinks Troy is angry.

After Troy and Rose bicker about why Gabe left to live on his own, Rose tells Troy that she wants him to sign Cory's football papers when the recruiter visits him next week. Troy, however, says that he found out that Cory hasn't been working down at the A&P, as they agreed—Cory's been lying. Lyons, trying to get Troy to empathize with Cory, says that Cory's only trying to fill out his dad's shoes—but Troy doesn't care, and thinks that, since Cory has reached the point where he wants to start disobeying him, it's time for Cory to move on and become his own man.

Troy's fundamental distrust of Lyons is revealed here even more than it was previously. Upon hearing about the raiding of a club Lyons plays at, Troy automatically assumes that his son was somehow involved in the crime. This speaks to Troy's association of Lyons' lifestyle with debauchery and illegality, while Lyons only claims to be trying to act on his passions—on his love for music.



Troy's distrust of Lyons continues, as he assumes that Lyons is going to ask for more money—that he doesn't intend to keep his promise, which he made in the first scene, to pay his father back. Further, Troy's refusal to accept Lyons' payment suggests that he wants to keep his son in a kind of limbo, where he can't get the gratification of keeping his promise—paying Troy back.



Gabe's delusional obsession with Judgment Day reemerges here, and Lyons actually seems to play into his uncle's fantasies, perhaps out of sympathy for his condition, whereas Troy and Rose seem to always avoid acknowledging Gabe's comments about spirituality and the afterlife. This perhaps speaks to the larger imagination and consequent empathy of Lyons.



Gabe seems fixated on this problem—of worrying that Troy is mad at him—since he keeps repeating it. But Troy and Rose keep playing into it, explaining that Troy isn't mad—perhaps in an attempt to assuage what they view as Gabe's perpetual, irreversible madness.



Troy's continued refusal to empathize with Cory's passion for football—to see in his son a genuine aspiration for the sport, an aspiration informed by a world of race relations which greatly differs from Troy's growing up—surfaces here yet again. Troy sees Cory's dedication to football as a fundamental act against his authority as a father, and not as a rightful expression of Cory's individuality—Troy thinks Cory's assertion of his own desires fundamentally goes against the father-son bond.



Bono then talks about his own father, saying how he never knew him, since his dad was always moving around, “searching for the New Land,” going from one woman to the next. Troy chimes in, and says sometimes he wishes he never knew his father, since he didn’t really care about his kids, only wanting them to learn to walk so that they could help work on his farm. Lyons responds, saying that Troy’s father should have just left and moved on, but Troy says he couldn’t because of his eleven kids. With a bit of pride and a change of mood, Troy adds that his father felt a responsibility for his children even though he mistreated them, and, if he hadn’t felt that responsibility, he could have just walked away.

Bono adds that a lot of fathers back in his and Troy’s childhood used to just leave their families behind, and says that they’d get the “walking blues” from traveling on foot so much from place to place.

Troy then starts to talk about his past with a new level of detail. He says that his father never had the walking blues, since he stayed with his family—but, he adds, his father could be “evil,” and that was why his mother left. One night, Troy’s mother sneaked out of the house after his father had gone to sleep, and never came back—even though she told Troy she’d return to take him with her.

Troy then tells the story of the day he left home (at the age of fourteen). One day, when his father sent him out to plow the fields of his farm, Troy, instead of obeying his father, tied up their plowing mule (“Greyboy”) and went to see a local girl he was attracted to. Troy and the girl ended up settling by a nearby creek, and started having sex. Greyboy, however, had gotten loose and wandered back home, and so Troy’s dad went looking for his son. Finding Troy with the thirteen-year-old girl, Troy’s father started whipping him with straps off Greyboy’s harness. Troy then ran to get away, only to see that his father wasn’t mad because he hadn’t done any farm work, but because he wanted the little girl for himself.

Seeing his father rape the girl, Troy says that “right there is where I become a man,” and he started whipping his father with the reins that were used on him. The girl ran off, and Troy says his father was so angry that he looked like the **devil**. All Troy remembers after that is waking up lying by the creek, with his dog Blue licking his face—Troy says his face was so swollen that he thought he’d gone blind. The only thing he knew to do, he concludes, was to leave his father’s house.

We get the sense that there’s been a cycle of bad fathers repeating generation after generation, and we’re simply witnessing the effects of this cycle in the parenting style of someone like Troy. Though Troy’s father was difficult to deal with, Troy says he was nonetheless a caring person who worked very hard to provide for all eleven of his children—and perhaps we can say the same thing of Troy. Though Troy is often cruel to Cory, he nonetheless works a very grueling job day-in and day-out to provide for his son; perhaps, then, caught up in the cycle of toughened and harsh fatherhood, Troy is just following in his father’s footsteps.



Bono’s comment about the walking blues underscores the harsh realities felt by those brave black men who chose to emigrate North from the sharecropping South (like Troy) seeking a better future.



Troy’s tale about being abandoned is not merely another one of his tall tales; Troy, in a very rare circumstance, is telling what appears to be the whole truth of his past, even though it’s a very painful memory. (Perhaps Troy is inspired by the alcohol he’s drinking.)



Troy’s spree of seeming truth-telling continues, and this story about the mule and the little girl gives us a greater insight into the violent and base character of his father. The fact that Troy’s father wasn’t mad at his son for shirking his duty at the fields, but for taking an incredibly young, prospective suitor away from him, speaks to his father’s intense aggression and lack of any stable sense of conscience or moral judgment—we can therefore empathize with the difficulty of Troy’s youth.



The extreme violence and sheer disregard for the health and safety of his own son (not to mention the girl) is shocking, and shows the bitterly distorted and cold character of Troy’s father. Yet it also might give us a bit of sympathy for Troy—compared to the ogre of his own dad, Troy seems like a model father; thought trapped in a cycle of mediocre fatherhood, perhaps Troy believes himself to be doing the best he can in steering Cory down the right path to adulthood.



Gabriel re-enters the yard with a sandwich Rose made him, and Troy says that he doesn't know what happened to his father, just that he hopes he's dead and found some peace. He says he lost touch with every sibling of his except Gabriel. Lyons, hearing this story for the first time, is surprised by how young Troy was when he left home.

Troy then explains that he walked two-hundred miles from his home to Mobile, but Lyons doesn't believe him—Bono chimes in, and adds that walking was the only way to get around in those days, in 1918. Troy says that, once he got to Mobile, he realized it was impossible to find a job and a place to live, and that blacks were forced to live beneath bridges on riverbanks in makeshift shacks of sticks and tarpaper.

Troy says he started stealing food to survive, then money, and that, after one thing led to another, he met Lyons' mom (different than Rose). When Lyons was born, Troy had to start stealing three times as much—he says that, when he tried to rob a man one day, the man shot him in the chest, but as he pulled the trigger, Troy jumped at him with his knife, killing him. Troy explains that this got him fifteen years in prison, where he met Bono and learned how to play baseball.

After Troy's story, Lyons asks him to come see his performance later that evening, but Troy says he's too old to hang out in the clubs Lyons frequents. Lyons leaves soon after, and Troy asks Rose if supper is ready, implying—in front of Bono—that she should hurry, since they're overdue to have sex. Embarrassed, Rose objects to Troy's crudeness, but Troy says he's known "this nigger," Bono, for a very long time, and tells Bono he loves him. Bono reciprocates Troy's affection, and leaves to get home to his wife, Lucille.

ACT 2: SCENE 1

The second act begins the following morning. Cory is in the yard swinging a baseball bat, trying to imitate his father's swing, but, Wilson writes—in a note in the script—that Cory's swing is awkward and less sure than Troy's. Rose enters the yard from the house and asks for Cory's help with a cupboard, and Cory says that he refuses to quit the football team, despite what his father says.

The tragedy of Troy's decision to leave home comes full circle: it meant the desertion of nearly his entire family, and a radical independence divorced from the life he had grown to know. While it meant leaving his abusive father, it also meant years of loneliness and hardship.



The fact that Lyons doesn't believe his father when he talks about his two-hundred mile trip he made on-foot to Mobile immediately tells us that Troy has never revealed this personal history to his thirty-four-year-old son. It's as if Troy has been holding all of this inside for his whole life, allowing it to fester, and telling tall tales to ward off the harsh reality of his actual past.



The full extent of Troy's tragic past continues to be revealed, and here we can see how the effects of racism at the economic level propelled him to commit crime just in order to survive—to feed himself and his family. We can see how a structurally racist society propelled him into a future of imprisonment.



Troy continues to be crude to Rose in front of Bono, and Troy's justification—that Bono is like a member of the family—seems inadequate. Troy has consistently refused to heed his wife's wish that he not debase her in front of their friends. Further, Troy's disinterest in his son's career as a musician suggests that he's unjustified in criticizing Lyons so harshly, when he seems to know nothing about what he actually does and how well he does it.



Cory's swinging of his father's bat is a gesture which symbolizes his attempt to fill his father's shoes—though he struggles, and isn't sure in his swing. Whereas Troy exudes almost obnoxious confidence, Cory isn't able to muster up such hubris, as evidenced by his awkward swing.



Rose replies that she'll talk to Troy when he returns, explaining that he had to go to the police station to check on Gabe, who was arrested for disturbing the peace. Troy returns, with Bono, and says that he bailed Gabe out by paying fifty dollars. Troy tells Rose to go inside the house and get Cory, since he wants his help building the **fence**.

Bono starts to help Troy with sawing wood for the **fence**, and Troy says that all the police wanted, in arresting Gabe, was money—that they've arrested him six or seven times now, and they "stick out their hands" whenever they see Troy coming.

Bono agrees with Troy that all the police care about is money. Bono then criticizes Troy for using hard wood to build the **fence** (probably because he finds it difficult to cut), saying that all he needs is soft pine—but Troy insists that he knows what he's doing, and that pine wood is used for inside purposes only. But Bono counters that a fence built with pine wood would last the rest of Troy's lifetime. Troy, however, asks how Bono knows how long he's going to live, and adds that he may just live forever.

Bono then tells Troy he's seen where he and Alberta "all done got tight." Troy asks what Bono means, and Bono explains that he's seen how Troy laughs and jokes with Alberta all the time (where they meet for their romantic encounters). But Troy insists that he laughs and jokes with all the women in his life—yet Bono says that he means a different kind of laughing and joking.

Cory then enters the yard from the house, and Troy tells him that Bono is complaining that the wood's too hard to cut. Wanting to show off Cory's strength, Troy tells Cory to show Bono "how it's done" and cut some wood. Bono admires the sense of ease with which Cory works with the hard wood.

Frustrated with building the **fence**, Cory questions why Rose even wants it built in the first place. Supporting Rose, Bono replies that, while some people build fences to keep people out, some build them to keep people in, and that Rose just wants to hold on to her family because she loves them. But this irritates Troy, who says that he doesn't need anyone to tell him that his wife loves him.

Rose continues to be a staunch ally of Cory's, remaining committed to his future as a football player. The arrest of Gabe raises our suspicions since, though he's a bit odd and aloof, Gabe is nevertheless peaceful and well-meaning.



Here, we see the real reason behind Gabe's arrest—a racist scapegoating of a mentally-ill black man as a dangerous threat to the public in order to make a profit. It seems that this happens frequently, and that Troy always pays the price.



Troy's questioning of Bono—about how he could possibly know how long he's going to live, since he might just live forever—is yet another instant of Troy's fantasizing, and it's clear that Troy is no longer in a place to speak the truth about the reality of his past. Further, Troy's insistence on using hard wood can be read as a symbol for his unnecessarily tough and hardened nature, and mistreatment of Cory.



Here, Bono officially confronts Troy with the reality of his affair with Alberta, and (typical of Troy), despite facing the truth of his actions, Troy continues to believe he can live a lie, and persuade Bono that he's not doing anything out of the ordinary with Alberta.



This is a very rare moment in the play—a moment where Troy actually expresses pride in his son, Cory, for doing something properly. It seems that Troy is only ever proud of his sons when they perform manual labor to his liking.



Knowing that Troy is having an affair with Alberta, Bono is trying to make comments that subliminally convince Troy he's making a mistake by betraying Rose. Troy, however, can tell that Bono is fishing for something, and is probably irritated that he can no longer keep up his fantasy and/or ruse of fidelity.



Wanting a private moment with Bono, Troy tells Cory to go into the house to get a saw. Troy asks Bono what he meant by his comment about Rose wanting to hold on to her family, and Bono, believing Troy to be cheating on Rose, tries to appeal to Troy's better judgment and love for Rose. Bono says he's known her and Troy for nearly his whole life. He remembers when they met, and adds that a lot of women were interested in Troy at the time, but Bono knew that, when Troy picked Rose, he made the right decision—that he was a man of sense. Bono, inspired by Troy's decision, decided to start following him, thinking that following Troy's mindset might take him somewhere in life. Troy, Bono says, taught him a lot—to “take life as it comes along and keep putting one foot in front of the other.” Bono finishes by telling Troy that Rose is a good woman.

Seeming still agitated by Bono's comment, Troy wonders what motive Bono has in saying all of this about Rose, but Bono denies having anything particular on his mind. Troy is still unsatisfied by this, however, and pushes Bono for an explanation, but Bono has nothing to add—he just insists that Rose loves Troy. Troy thinks Bono is trying to say that Rose is too good for him—that he doesn't measure up because he's seeing Alberta. Bono responds by saying he knows how important Rose is to Troy, explaining that he just doesn't want to see him mess their relationship up.

Troy says that he appreciates Bono's sentiments, and claims that, while he didn't go out looking for anything, and thinks that no woman compares with Rose, Alberta has nonetheless stuck onto him, and that he can't shake her off.

Bono replies that Troy is ultimately the one responsible for his actions, but Troy explains that he's not ducking any responsibility, claiming that, “as long as it sets right in my heart,” then he's okay, and further, his heart is all he ever listens to. His heart, Troy says, will always tell him right from wrong, and that he won't ever mistreat Rose, adding that he loves and respects her for all she's added to his life.

While Bono doesn't doubt Troy's love and respect for Rose, he says he worries about what will happen when Rose finds out, since sooner or later it's going to happen if he doesn't drop Alberta and continues juggling both relationships. Troy replies that he's been trying to figure out how to work it out, and Bono, while he doesn't want to get caught up in Troy and Rose's personal business, encourages Troy to “work it so it come out right.”

Here, we see the seeds of Bono's desire to follow Troy—the seeds of his role as a follower, as August Wilson writes at the beginning of the play, in their relationship. Troy's decision to commit himself to Rose inspired Bono, who deemed Troy's commitment as an act of high sensibility and mature judgement. Still as equally committed to Troy as a friend many years later, Bono now feels the need to intervene in Troy's misdeeds and steer him towards the path that most reflects the sensibility he witnessed in Troy as a younger man.



Bono's awkwardly obvious sauntering around the elephant in the room—that Troy is sleeping with Alberta—continues, as he refuses to cite Troy's affair as the reason for his comments about Rose. Yet Troy finally names his misdeed, confessing to having an affair with Alberta, and tries to fault Bono for accusing Troy of being a lesser man for committing adultery. But Bono assuages Troy's reactionary response, and says that all he cares about is the health of Troy and Rose's relationship.



Finally, the tension between Troy and Bono is resolved, and Troy fully acknowledges that he has gotten attached to Alberta—even though he seems to be honest when he says he never fully intended to.



Troy's faith that his heart will never steer him wrong—that his visceral feelings about things are the ultimate guides for his moral judgement—testify to his narcissism, and the fact that he is ill-equipped to distinguish between reason and emotion, morality and his own fantasies.



Bono continues trying to pinpoint the irrationality to Troy's thinking, insisting that there's no way he can keep up his high-wire act of juggling both relationships without Rose finding out, and that he had better drop Alberta if he wants to keep up his relationship with his wife.



Troy replies that he gets involved in Bono and Lucille's business all the time and, confirming this, he asks Bono when he's going to buy Lucille the refrigerator she's been wanting. Bono replies that once Troy finishes building the **fence** for Rose, he'll buy Lucille her refrigerator. Bono then leaves to get back to Lucille, saying that he wants to see Troy put the fence up by himself in order to save his money, since it will take Troy another six months to finish it without him.

Rose then enters the yard from the house, and asks Troy why the police arrested Gabe, and what's going to happen to him. Troy tells her he was arrested for disturbing the peace, and that a judge set up a hearing for him in three weeks. Rose adds that she thinks it would be good for him to be put in the hospital, but Troy says Gabe should be free—that it wouldn't be right for anyone to lock him up, since his life was ruined by fighting a pointless war.

Rose then tells Troy to come inside for lunch, but he says he has something to tell her—he confesses that he's going to be a father. Shocked, Rose cannot believe that Troy is telling her this, and—suddenly—Gabe enters the scene, with a rose in his hand. He offers Rose the flower, and she thanks him; he then asks Troy if he's mad at him since “them bad mens come and put [him] away.” Troy denies being mad at Gabe, and tries to continue his conversation with Rose, but she says there's nothing he can say to explain his actions.

Rose tells Gabe to go inside and get a piece of watermelon, and after he leaves, Rose begins questioning Troy. She wonders why, after all these years, Troy's just now bringing this upon her—she could have expected this ten or fifteen years ago, she says, but not now. Troy says that age has nothing to do with it, and Rose starts to stand up for herself. She says she's tried to be the best wife possible, and that she's never wanted anything “half” (like Troy's new baby) in her family, since her whole family growing up was “half,” and she finds it frustrating when she tries to talk with her brother and sisters about their parents. Troy tells Rose to stop making a fuss, insisting that she ought to know what's going on, but she exclaims that she doesn't want to know.

Troy adds that he can't make anything go away—that he's already done the deed and he can't wish it away—but Rose counters by saying that he doesn't want it to go away. Maybe, she says, Troy wants to wish all their eighteen years together and their boy, Cory, away—but he can't do that, she says, because her life is invested in him. She adds that he ought to have stayed in her bed, where he belonged.

The two friends ultimately leave on a friendly note, as Bono turns the gravity of their conversation into a not-so-serious betting game. The fact that Bono leaves to get home to Lucille—whom he usually leaves the Maxson household for—underscores his dedication to his wife (a dedication modeled, as we have learned, after how he views Troy's relation to Rose) in opposition to Troy's adultery.



Rose continues to harp on Troy about Gabe being institutionalized, but he refuses to heed her arguments. He still seems to believe he has some fundamental responsibility to Gabe, at least at this point in the play, both because of Gabe's activities in the war and for the money he (inadvertently) provided Troy.



Leading up to perhaps the most powerful moment of the entire play, just as Troy informs Rose of his adultery, the gravity of his declaration gets intersected by the ignorant whimsy of Gabe's presence, who, unknowingly, offers Rose a timely dash of comfort with a rose. Troy and Rose's heated moment is nerve-gratingly suspended by their momentary dialogue with Gabe.



Beginning the most dramatic exchanges of the entire play, Rose confronts Troy's confession face-to-face, and stands her own ground to the man who frequently talks down to and debases her, and who has now admitted to the greatest betrayal of her dedication. Rose is not oblivious to such philandering tendencies in Troy, claiming that she would not have been surprised to have heard such a confession earlier in their marriage, but she had faith that Troy matured.



Rose not only insists that Troy can't simply renounce his actions—that he can't wish them away—but also that he likely doesn't want them to go away. This is powerful: Rose sees through Troy's lies and rhetoric. She knows Troy probably doesn't feel much remorse, and that he has little regard for the life he's built with Rose.



Troy insists that “we”—he and Rose—can get a handle on their dispute, but Rose asks where this “we” that Troy is bringing up was when he was sleeping with Alberta. Troy responds by saying that Alberta gives him a different idea about who he is—that Alberta lets him get away from the pressures and problems he feels in his own home. With Alberta, he says, he doesn’t have to worry about such mundane things as paying bills—he just gets to be “a part of myself that I ain’t never been.”

Rose replies, wondering whether Troy intends to keep seeing her or not, and he says that he can’t give up the laughter and joy which Alberta helps him to feel. After Rose suggests that Troy leave *her* for Alberta, since she’s apparently a better woman than her, Troy tries to defuse her. He says that a man could not ask for a better wife than Rose, but that he locked himself into a pattern where, being so concerned with taking care of her, he forgot to take care of himself.

After Rose proclaims that it was her job, as his wife, to take care of Troy—and that she’d tried to all her life—Troy says that he always tried all his life to be decent, and that he tried to be a good husband, the best he could. But also, he adds, one is born with “two strikes” before you arrive in the world, and one must guard this very closely—for you cannot afford another strike. Troy adds that, with everything lined up against you, you must “go out swinging.” He concludes that, when he left the penitentiary, nothing could make him strike-out anymore—that he was going to look after Rose and the boy they had.

Rose tells Troy he should have stayed in her bed, and Troy responds that, when he saw Alberta, “she firmed up my backbone.” Arguing that, after eighteen years, Rose should understand that he’d want to “steal second”—to have sex with Alberta—Rose shuts Troy down, exclaiming that he should have held onto her.

Here Troy’s narcissism explicitly rears its head again, when he speaks about how Alberta gives him a different sense of himself, a freedom of expression which he feels is hindered by his family at home. Instead of being bogged down with the everyday tasks of being a father and husband, with Alberta, he can let loose and be someone else.



This narcissism which steers Troy away from his commitments to his family continues to show itself, as Troy says he can’t possibly give up his relationship with Alberta. Troy, however, tries to cover up his selfishness by insisting that he took so much care of Rose that he stopped taking care of himself.



After Rose firmly asserts that it was her duty to take care of Troy, and that she tried with all her energy to do so, Troy starts spouting more of his euphemisms about “striking out,” which suggests a fundamental divorce on his behalf from the gravity of Rose’s feelings. Content with explaining his actions in obscure metaphors about the necessity of living life to the fullest, Troy seems detached from Rose’s real pain.



Troy’s insensitivity comes to a pinnacle here, when he claims that Rose should understand why he went for Alberta—but Rose won’t budge, rejecting Troy’s excuses by powerfully affirming that his duty as a husband was to hold onto her, and no other woman.



Troy responds by saying that he'd stood on first base for eighteen years with Rose, and, finally thought that, "well goddamn it . . . go on for it!" But Rose counters, saying that nothing they're talking about has to do with baseball. Troy continues to argue with Rose, and insists that she's not listening to him. But Rose maintains that she's been standing with Troy for eighteen years and, further, she has a life of her own. She tells Troy that she has eighteen years of her own life—of her own dreams and hopes—and suggests to Troy that, though she's had her own fantasies with other men, she's never played-into them, always putting her responsibilities to her family first. She concludes that, ultimately, she planted herself inside of Troy to bloom, despite her most intimate needs. She says that, though she knew the soil of Troy's world was rocky, she nonetheless gave everything to his world in order to love and support him.

Troy responds by telling Rose that she says he takes and never gives—and he grabs her, painfully, by the arm. Rose tells Troy that he's hurting her, but he doesn't care—he only says that she has falsely accused him of taking and not giving, concluding that he's given her everything he's got. Before they get into an even nastier fight, Cory enters the scene and wrestles with his father, ultimately gaining the upper hand. In response, Troy tells Cory that he's "struck out" for the second time—and that he better not provoke him again.

ACT 2: SCENE 2

The second scene occurs six months later; Troy enters the yard from the house and, before he can leave, Rose appears from inside, and says she wants to talk. Troy asks her why, after months of not communicating, she suddenly wants to speak with him. Rose, wanting to reach out to her husband, responds by saying that she wants Troy to come home tomorrow, Friday—straight home, to her, and not anywhere or anybody else. But Troy dismisses her sincere plea, saying that he always comes home after work, and further: since Friday is his payday, he'll want to cash his check and hang out at the local bar with his friends.

Rose tells Troy that she can't keep living like this—alone, distanced from her husband, always wondering where he is (and imagining that he's always with Alberta). But he continues to reject her concerns, and insists that he comes home every night, missing Rose's whole point (that she wants him to prioritize coming straight home, to her and her alone). She then asks him, powerfully, "What about me? When's my time to enjoy life?"

Troy keeps deploying his odd, emotionally detached baseball metaphors, and finally Rose denounces them, saying that they have nothing to do with Troy's betrayal of their relationship. She affirms her commitment to Troy and hard work and devotion as a wife once more—this is perhaps the most powerful moment of the play. Finally, after all this time of Troy's excessively, undeservedly large presence in all of his relationships, Rose takes a stand against his daunting stature, and affirms that she has her own hopes and dreams, and her own needs to be fulfilled—but that she did her duty as a wife by putting her husband and family first.



Troy shows his brutality and abusive nature as he—threatened by Rose's assertion of her independence—tries to quell the fact that she has the upper hand in their argument, though he postures his anger as being motivated by Rose's inability to understand him. Cory boldly asserts himself against Troy, showing his love for his mother at the same time.



Rose tries to reach out one last time to Troy, and see if he'll re-commit himself to her and their relationship with fidelity. We can assume that, for the past six months, Troy has continued his relationship with Alberta, refusing to re-cultivate his monogamy with Rose. By asking Troy to come straight home to her, Rose is simply asking for his devotion again, his sincere commitment to the cause of their relationship, but Troy, as usual, disregards her concern.



Rose is reaching her wit's end in being able to tolerate Troy's continued relationship with Alberta, and Troy persists in his utter disregard for Rose's feelings, dashing over the nuance of what she's saying by insisting that he always comes home (eventually). By asking the powerful question about her own enjoyment, Rose continues to affirm herself in the face of Troy's disregard.



Troy, still resisting any genuine communication with Rose, says that he's on his way to see Alberta at the hospital, since it looks like she's going to have the baby early. Rose then tells him that Gabe has been institutionalized—locked up in a psychiatric ward—and that she read in the newspaper that Troy arranged it all. But Troy denies any involvement in Gabe's detainment, and says that the newspaper is lying. Rose accuses Troy of treating Gabe just like he treated Cory—he betrayed them both. Whereas Troy wouldn't sign Cory's recruitment papers, he was willing to sign the papers for Gabe's hospitalization. Rose adds that Troy will profit from sending Gabe away, since he'll get half of his brother's money.

The telephone inside Troy and Rose's home rings, and Rose goes to answer it. She returns, and we learn that it was the hospital calling: Alberta died during childbirth. The baby—a girl—is okay, and healthy. Rose says she wonders who will bury Alberta, and Troy accuses her of being petty, caring only about whether Alberta had insurance. But Rose denies meaning anything of the sort. She then asserts herself, telling Troy, "I am your wife. Don't push me away."

Troy responds by saying that he's not pushing anyone away, and asks Rose to give him some room to breathe and process Alberta's death. Rose leaves, and Troy addresses **Mr. Death**. Speaking to his own personified phantom of death, Troy challenges Mr. Death, saying that he's going to build a **fence** around his yard to keep him out, and that Death had better bring his army and wrestling clothes. Troy says that their fight is between them, and nobody else, and that when Death is ready for him, he should come and knock on Troy's front door.

ACT 2: SCENE 3

The next scene occurs three days later, in the evening. Rose is inside the house, listening to the ball game, awaiting Troy. When Troy enters the yard, he's carrying his newborn child (Raynell), and calls to Rose. She enters from the house, and stands on the porch. Egging her on to help him raise his child, Troy tells Rose that his daughter is motherless and doesn't know anything about "grownups' business," meaning his own affair with Alberta. But Rose rejects him, and asks, "What you telling me for, Troy?" She then re-enters the house.

Troy's hypocrisy emerges again here: after all the time he spent defending Gabe against Rose's opinion that it would be good for him to be institutionalized, Troy has finally caved in on his advocacy for Gabe's freedom—the motivation being money. Troy, at this point, seems to have just about betrayed everyone around him except Bono. Troy's signing of Gabe's hospital papers is ironic, as it signs Gabe into a lack of freedom, whereas not signing Cory's recruitment papers had something of a similar effect: of limiting Cory's future horizons.



Troy's accusation of Rose—that she's petty—is ironically hypocritical, and another demonstration of his ability to fundamentally sever himself from the reality around him, and proclaim himself to be the one in the right—the one who's worked the hardest and been the most virtuous.



Troy's tendency towards fantasizing about death resurfaces here—unable to accept that Alberta died due to chance circumstances pertaining to childbirth (and also that, by impregnating her, Troy played some role in her death), Troy projects a sinister, personified form onto a figure of death who has personal motivations and consciously interferes in Troy's life to make it more difficult.



It seems that Troy really will stop at no end, and will—despite having basically ignored Rose for the past six months in favor of Alberta—nonetheless ask her to mother his and Alberta's daughter. It seems that Rose has reached her limit, that she's given up on Troy entirely, and her refusal to give in to Troy's pleas seems like a powerful desertion of him.



Troy then sits down on the porch with his infant daughter (Raynell), and says that he isn't sorry for anything he's done, since it felt right in his heart. He asks Raynell why she's smiling, saying that he's scared since they don't have a home at the moment. Rose then enters from the house again, and Troy begs her to help him take care of Raynell. Rose agrees to help, since Raynell is innocent, and tells him "you can't visit the sins of the father upon the child." She then adds: "From right now . . . this child got a mother. But you a womanless man."

Rose's kindness and empathy ultimately lead her to give in to Troy's plea—but she qualifies her willingness to take care of Raynell as having nothing to do with her love for Troy. Rose feels bad for Raynell, who she knows is innocent, but she does not show any sympathy for Troy. Ultimately, she does desert Troy.



ACT 2: SCENE 4

The fourth scene occurs two months later. Lyons enters the yard from the street, and knocks on the door of the Maxson household, calling for Rose. He asks her where Troy is—he wants to pay his father back twenty dollars. Rose says Troy will be back any minute, but Lyons replies that he has to pick up his girlfriend, Bonnie, so Rose tells him to put his money on the table.

Even about a year from the beginning of the play, Lyons is still borrowing money from Troy, suggesting his continued failure to really launch his career as a musician.



As Lyons heads to leave, Cory enters the scene, and Lyons apologizes for not making Cory's graduation, explaining that he had a gig during it. Cory says he's trying to find a job, and Lyons empathizes with him about how much of a struggle it is to find work. Lyons tells Cory to talk to Troy, saying that he'll be able to get Cory a job. Lyons leaves, and Cory goes over to the tree in the yard, and picks up his father's baseball bat.

Lyons' failure to make his brother's graduation seems like another example of his lack of maturity and ability to successfully organize his life. Further, Lyons' suggestion that Cory get a job through Troy is ironic, since he's consistently refused to do so himself.



Troy enters the yard, and he and Cory eye one another; Cory puts the bat down, and exits the yard. As Troy goes to enter the house, Rose exits it with Raynell, carrying a cake. Troy says to her: "I'm coming in and everybody's going out."

One of the most significant moments of the play, Troy's statement about everyone 'going out' speaks to the failure of the fence he built to keep his family together.



Troy then reaches into his pocket and grabs some money to give Rose, and she tells him to put it on the table. Troy then asks her when she'll be coming back home, but she disregards his concern, saying that he shouldn't bother asking—it doesn't matter when she comes back. This angers Troy; he tries to demand an answer, but Rose just tells him that his dinner is on the stove, and all he needs to do is heat it up. Rose then exits the yard, and Troy, sitting down on the steps, takes a bottle of alcohol out from his pocket, and commences drinking and singing.

Here, we see that the tables have turned—whereas Troy used to pursue his own life and disregard Rose's, now it's the other way around. By refusing to tell Troy where she's going, and telling him that his dinner is on the stove, it seems that Rose now only feels obligated to Troy in the way he used to with her: as strictly a provider, and nothing more. Rose continues to carry out what she must think to be her minimal duty as someone who lives with Troy—and later she will affirm to Cory that familial bonds shouldn't be disregarded.



As Troy sings the song about his old dog Blue, Bono enters the yard. Bono says he wanted to visit with Troy, since he barely sees him anymore, ever since Troy got the promotion. Bono says he's going to retire in two years, and Troy agrees that he's considering it too. But Bono challenges Troy, saying that he could easily drive for another five years—Bono's stuck hauling heavy garbage.

Troy says that driving the garbage truck isn't the same as hauling garbage, since you have no one to talk to, and then he asks how Lucille, Bono's wife, is doing. Bono says Lucille is doing alright, despite her arthritis. Troy then offers Bono a drink of his gin, but Bono resists, saying he just wanted to stop by and say hello—he has a dominoes game to make at a friend's house. But Troy argues with Bono, saying that Bono can't play dominoes—that he always used to beat Bono at the game. Yet Bono says he learned from Troy, and is getting better. He tells Troy to stop by his house sometime, and Troy says that he learned from Rose that Bono finally bought Lucille a refrigerator. Bono affirms this, saying that—since Troy finally built the **fence**—he figured he ought to keep up the deal the two made earlier, and buy his wife the fridge. Bono exits, after Troy tells him to take care and promises to “stop over” some time.

Cory then enters the yard, and, once again, he and Troy eye each other. Cory tries to go into the house, but Troy is blocking the entrance; after accusing Troy of blocking him, Troy reprimands Cory. Troy says that the house is *his*, since he bought and paid for it—he tells Cory that he ought to say “excuse me.” But Cory persists in trying to get past Troy, and Troy grabs his son's leg, shoving him back. Troy then accuses Cory of trying to walk over him, and Cory asserts that the house belongs to him as well, and that he's not afraid of Troy. The two get into a heated argument. Cory resists Troy's accusation that he was walking over his father, and declares that he was simply trying to walk past Troy as he sang drunkenly to himself. This infuriates Troy, who's in disbelief that Cory didn't say “excuse me.”

Troy then tells Cory that he's out of line—that, because he's grown up, he suddenly thinks his father doesn't count, and so Cory doesn't have to say things like “excuse me” anymore. Cory says “that's right,” and criticizes Troy for “always talking this dumb stuff,” and asks Troy to get out of his way. When Troy accuses Cory of being ungrateful for all he gave to his son, Cory argues back, saying that Troy never gave him anything—that all Troy ever did was try to make his son afraid of his authority. Cory explains that, growing up, he was terrified of his father, and that Rose—though she tries to stand up to Troy—is afraid too.

Even though Troy got hired as a truck driver, we can infer that he's the only black worker at his company to do so—further, he hasn't used his confidence and rhetorical powers at work to help Bono get hired as a driver. It's as if he's only advocated for equality at work in order to serve himself, not really in the service of justice at all.



Troy and Bono's interaction seems to reveal that a distance, has grown between the two. Yet despite Troy's ultimate refusal to rectify things with Rose—which was his advice—Bono still remains committed to the friendship. Further, Bono seems to be becoming more confident, probably because of witnessing his hero—Troy—devolve into a less than ideal person. Like Bono challenging Troy (in the previous paragraph) by suggesting he work five more years, Bono asserts himself here against Troy's taunts that he can't play dominoes. Also of note is that Bono is just 'stopping by,' now—he doesn't hang around to drink with Troy as he used to, and insists that he has to get to a meeting with other, perhaps new, friends.



Troy seems like he's itching to get into an argument with Cory, just because. Troy gets incredibly irritated over what probably counts as minor disrespect on Cory's part—though it's unclear, from the text, who is in the right (though Troy's judgment is impaired because of alcohol)—and blows something trivial into a big fight. This speaks to Cory's evolved sense of confidence and autonomy in the face of his father, from whom he used to shrink in fear—but now, however, he's declaring that he has an equal right to live in the house, and also, crucially, that he's not afraid of his father.



Cory's assertion of “that's right,” and his comment that his father is always talking about such “dumb stuff” as how and to what extent his son does/does not comport with his authority, suggest that he's begun to see through Troy's ways of manipulating him and making him feel unequal and subservient as a person. Further, Cory's bold claim that Troy never gave him anything shows that Cory has psychologically evolved to realize his own self-worth, and how his father failed to nourish it.



Troy tells Cory to leave Rose out of their argument, and advances towards his son in rage. Cory exclaims: “What you gonna do . . . give me a whupping? You can’t whup me no more. You’re too old,” and Troy shoves him. Troy yells at Cory, telling him to get out of his yard, but Cory corrects him, saying that it’s not really his father’s yard, since Troy stole Gabe’s money to pay for it. Even more infuriated, Troy advances on Cory, telling him to get his “black ass” out of his yard. Cory picks up the baseball bat.

Cory says that he isn’t going anywhere, and swings the bat at Troy, who backs across the yard. Cory misses, but then swings again—and Troy says that, if Cory wants to draw the bat on him, that he’s only going to succeed in hitting his father if he swings with the intent of killing him. Troy then sticks his head out as a vulnerable, bare target, but Cory can’t execute the would-be fatal swing, and Troy wrestles him for the bat. Threatening to hit Cory with the bat, Troy stops himself, and orders Cory to leave his house. Cory tells him to let Rose know that he’ll be back for his things, and Troy responds that all of Cory’s possessions will “be on the other side of that **fence**.”

Cory exits, and Troy assumes a batting stance, and starts to taunt **Mr. Death**. Troy shouts at Death, egging him on: “Come on! It’s between you and me now! Come on! Anytime you want . . . but I ain’t gonna be easy.” The lights go down, ending the scene.

ACT 2: SCENE 5

The last scene of the play occurs in 1965, eight years after its beginning. Troy has died, and it’s the morning of his funeral. Rose, Bono, and Raynell (now seven years old) are gathered at the Maxson household. Raynell is in the yard, next to a garden which she’s planted; Rose calls her to get dressed for the funeral, and Raynell wonders why her garden hasn’t grown. Rose responds by saying that it isn’t going to grow overnight.

Cory enters the yard, dressed in a Marine corporal’s uniform, and August Wilson describes his posture as being distinctly militant, adding that Cory speaks with a “clipped sternness.” Cory says “hi” to Raynell—Raynell doesn’t remember him—and asks if her mother is home. Rose comes to the door to see Cory, and is shocked to see him—we get the sense that it’s been several years since they were united.

Cory continues to talk back to Troy, which truly demonstrates his lack of fear and the intensity of his anger. Cory’s assertion that Troy doesn’t really own the yard is the last straw for Troy, probably because it hits at the core of his hypocritical ways, such that Troy has no defense against it. All Troy can do is tell Cory to leave.



Perhaps more significant than the action of Cory and Troy’s fight is Troy’s declaration that Cory’s possessions will be on the other side of the fence when he returns for them. Once again, the fence has failed to hold the Maxson family together—it’s instead come to serve as a reference point for their division. Troy invokes the fence in order to express that Cory has been expelled from the territory within it, and that, from now on, his home is outside the fence.



Troy once again addresses his invented figure of death immediately following a personal tragedy—whereas last time it was in response to the loss of Alberta, now Troy is responding to the (less lethal) loss of his son.



August Wilson’s decision to not make Troy’s death an actual, real-time moment of the play has the effect of making Troy’s death seem almost trivial or superfluous—like an after-effect of something larger and more important. Further, with the sudden, off-stage vanishing of Troy and the now on-stage gathering of all his family, the distance between Troy and his family/friends before his death is amplified.



The marks of his father’s anger and stubbornness seem to be written across Cory’s evolved, matured self—he’s become the disciplined and no-nonsense man which his father never was.



As Rose and Cory embrace, Bono and Lyons enter the yard—they're both impressed by Cory's accomplishments in the military. Rose says she's very glad that Cory made it to the funeral, and adds that Gabe is still in the hospital, and she's not sure if he's going to be allowed to attend Troy's funeral or not.

Bono leaves to go help at the church where Troy's funeral will be held, and Rose re-introduces Raynell to Cory. Rose then tells Raynell to get ready for the funeral, and they both exit into the house. Lyons mentions that he's heard Cory is thinking about getting married, and Cory affirms this, saying he thinks he's "found the right one." Lyons adds that he and Bonnie have been split up for four years, and that he always knew Cory was going to make something of himself. Cory says he's been with the army for six years, and Lyons says he was sentenced to three years in jail for cashing other people's checks.

Cory asks if Lyons is still playing music, and Lyons says that he and some of his inmates have formed a band, and that they're going to try and stay together when they get out—he says that music still helps him to get out of bed in the morning. Lyons then exits to eat the breakfast which Rose has prepared, asking, briefly, if Cory is doing alright—Cory nods, and August Wilson writes that they "share a moment of silent grief."

Raynell re-enters the yard from the house, and says "hi" to Cory, asking him if he used to sleep in her room. Cory says yes—it used to be his room—and Rose comes to the door, telling Raynell to put on her good shoes for the funeral. Raynell exits into the house, and Rose tells Cory that Troy died swinging his baseball bat. Then, with great hesitation—mirroring his father's reluctance to tell Rose that he'd had an affair with Alberta—Cory tells Rose that he's not going to Troy's funeral. Rose, however, won't accept this, and insists that Cory attend. Even if he and his father didn't always see eye to eye, she says, Cory needs to put it aside. Rose adds that disrespecting Troy won't make Cory a man.

Cory responds by saying that, growing up, Troy was a shadow that "weighed on you and sunk into your flesh"—a shadow that tried to crawl into him and live through him. He says that, everywhere he looked, Troy was looking back at him, and that he just wants to find a way to get rid of his father's shadow. Rose replies: "You just like him. You got him in you good."

Cory's new stature and military garb must impress Bono and Lyons, who knew the uncertain and unstable atmosphere of his youth—despite all of that, Cory has made something of himself (although not what he originally wanted to), whereas Lyons has seemingly failed.



The juxtaposition of Lyons's failure to make something of his future and Cory's success is further amplified, as we get new information: Lyons no longer struggles just to launch a failed music career, but has followed in the footsteps of his father and turned to crime in order to make ends meet, despite being in circumstances where other opportunities are available (unlike in his father's time). Lyons has refused still, to this day, to get any job outside of music.



Lyons' continued commitment to music raises the question if, over the years, he's developed a more authentic appreciation for it—or whether he's still caught up in the image of being a musician. Further, it's remarkable that the two do not discuss their father's death whatsoever—they grieve in silence, and whether it's Troy's death which they grieve is debatable: they might just be grieving their own childhoods.



The fact that Troy died while swinging a baseball bat ironically harks back to his "striking out" anecdote, his career as a baseball player which was cut short, and the fact that he would swing his bat at "Mr. Death" when addressing "him." Further, Cory's unwillingness to go to Troy's funeral speaks to his desire to wash himself of his father, of the stains Troy made on Cory's life—and this suggests that Cory feels he hasn't fully escaped the grips of his father. Rose's insistence that Cory attend speaks to her opinion that there's something permanent about familial bonds.



Rose's comment that Cory is just like Troy, and that he has Troy deeply embedded within his personality, seems to suggest that she thinks Cory's attempts to outrun the imprint Troy left on his life is futile—that he should accept Troy for who he was, and acknowledge his massive influence.



Rose continues, saying that the shadow Cory mentioned was just Cory growing into himself—that it had nothing to do with Troy. She adds that Troy wanted Cory to be everything he wasn't, but, at the same time, Troy tried to make Cory into everything he was. She says that she doesn't know whether Troy was right or wrong, but that he at least meant to do more good than harm.

Rose then goes into a long description of her own relationship with Troy. She says that she married him in order to fill the emptiness in her life—she thought his energy would fill her to the point of bursting. However, once they were married, she didn't make enough room for herself—Troy, with his hefty presence, took up all of her life and her home. All Rose did was sacrifice herself for Troy, “give up little pieces” of her life, and watch Troy grow from it. She adds that, by the time Raynell was born, she and Troy had lost touch with each other. The phone rings, and Rose concludes that she took Raynell under her wing in an attempt to relive part of her life—to have one of the babies she always wanted but never had.

Raynell enters the yard, and tells Rose that the reverend is on the phone. Rose exits into the house, and Raynell once again says “hi” to Cory. She asks Cory if he knew Blue—Troy's dog—and they both begin singing the song Troy's father created about him. Whenever Raynell can't remember the lyrics, Cory fills them in for her. Rose then comes to the door, and announces that they're going to be ready to leave for the funeral soon.

Gabriel then enters the scene, and Rose, Cory, and Lyons are delighted to see him. Gabriel announces that “it's time to tell St. Peter to open the gates.” He then asks Troy's spirit if he's ready, and pulls out his trusty trumpet of judgment. Gabriel braces himself, ready to produce a glorious sound with his instrument, but no sound comes from it. August Wilson describes “a weight of impossible description” befalling Gabriel—“a trauma that a sane and normal mind would be unable to withstand”—a painful realization of some kind, likely that Troy failed to enter heaven. Gabriel then begins to dance hysterically, and when Lyons attempts to embrace him, he pushes him away. Ending the play, upon finishing his dance, Gabriel announces: “That's the way that go!”

Rose pivots somewhat around her previous point, though, clarifying that the reason Cory's attempts to outrun Troy are futile is that what Cory imagines Troy to be is really Cory himself—not actually Troy in reality. Her advocacy for Troy—that Troy truly wanted more good than harm—suggests that, with time and age, she's grown to have empathy for Troy's actions.



Rose's beautiful and heartfelt description of why she married Troy, and the problems which unfolded in their marriage, demonstrate that she's come to a decisive conclusion about why she and Troy lost touch with each other. Rose, in retrospect, regrets sacrificing herself so much for the marriage—for not voicing her own opinions, desires, and values, and for constantly catering to Troy's demanding and overbearing nature. Never met halfway by Troy, Rose eventually became detached from her own sense of self.



When Cory fills in the words which Raynell doesn't remember, it's as if he's playing the role of a guardian and teacher to Raynell in a way that's unique to himself, untouched by Troy's brooding authority. Though they sing Troy's favorite song, and though he lives on through their singing, Cory takes the song over: by filling-in the words, he actively permits its oral history to last, while taking over his father's place.



Gabriel's last, rather apathetic expression is a testament to his devotion to the order of God as being the prime executor of judgment—of whether Troy does or does not deserve to enter heaven. While Gabriel seems initially shocked at the moment when, we can infer, he witnesses Troy's sentencing to hell, he ultimately shrugs it off in a strange and gleeful but simultaneously serious sense of rapture—that's just the way, he concludes, God and judgment work. Though Gabriel appears as an insane man, this ability of his to think about judgment from an unbiased perspective suggests he isn't entirely without wisdom.





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