



Analyzing Troy Maxson

Fences

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Grades 8-12

1-2 Class Periods

Introduction:

The Ford's Theatre production of August Wilson's *Fences* reminds audiences that discrimination and lack of opportunity have profound impacts on personal lives and relationships. This lesson adapts an approach called the [Arc of Dialogue](#), a structure for facilitated dialogue created by Tammy Bormann and David Campt. The Arc of Dialogue structure includes four phases: Community building, sharing personal experiences, exploring beyond the personal experience and synthesizing the learning to come to a deeper understanding.

In this lesson, structured dialogue will be used to enable students to analyze and develop a deeper understanding of Troy Maxson's character in August Wilson's *Fences*. Student will look at specific scenes in the play to analyze how discrimination impacted Troy's life and shaped his worldview and his relationships. Students will consider their own experiences, along with the following questions: Where do they see discrimination in their lives today? Are they harmed by it, or do they benefit from it? Depending on their own experience or lack of experience with discrimination, what can they do to create a more equitable society for all?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify their own experience or lack of experience with discrimination
- Identify and discuss how Troy experienced discrimination and the effect it had on him
- Describe how these experiences shape Troy's worldview and relationships
- Identify opportunities to create a more equitable society

Guiding Questions:

- How does the way society is structured help some but hinder others?
- How does lack of opportunity and discrimination affect individuals? What is the impact on society as a whole?
- How can this discussion inspire us to create a more equitable society?
- How might Troy Maxson's life have been different if he hadn't been discriminated against because of his race?

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character or provoke a decision.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

Materials:

- *Fences*, scene selections (attached)
- [I am a Man](#) photograph
- Arc of Dialogue:
<https://mylearning.nps.gov/library-resources/arc-of-dialogue-strategy/>

Procedures:

- **Lesson Activity One: Where is your personal “starting line?”**
In the first activity, students will share aloud in response to a prompt in order to build community and will begin exploring their personal experiences with opportunity and discrimination.
- **Lesson Activity Two: Troy Maxson - What shaped him?**
In this second activity, students will analyze scenes from *Fences* and consider how discrimination and limits to Troy’s self-determination shaped him as a person.
- **Lesson Activity Three: Creating equitable starting points**
Students will respond to the quote, “Born on third base and thinks he hit a triple.”

The class will consider what barriers have been created to limit opportunity and self-determination, or the right to direct one's own life, in the United States. Are we all starting from the same point in the race of life? In small groups, they will brainstorm ideas about how to end discrimination and how to create a more equitable society. Each group will draft a vision statement and offer two solutions to share with the class at large.

Lesson Activity One: The starting line

- To build community, the students will be invited to share aloud their earliest memory of a time they felt the freedom to make their own choice about something important to them.
- Students will free write about a time in their life when they felt their right to self-determination, or the right to choose their own path, was limited by some aspect of their identity (e.g. gender, age, culture, race).
 - Tell students they will be discussing their writing with an elbow partner. Be sure to give students some low-risk examples they might have experienced. Perhaps they've had an experience where a parent or caregiver didn't let them see a movie they wanted to see based on age? Perhaps they weren't allowed to play a sport because it was only offered to one gender in their community or school?
 - If students want to share a more high-risk, personal example, remind them that they will discuss this with a classmate. They should only share what they feel comfortable sharing. Classmates also should be reminded to listen with respect and compassion.
- Students discuss their experiences with an elbow partner. Remind students to share only what they feel comfortable sharing. Remind classmates to practice active, respectful listening during the sharing.
- Partners will be invited to volunteer to share with the class at large. Again, remind the students to practice active, respectful listening.

Lesson Activity Two: Troy Maxson—What shaped him?

- Students will read silently the passage titled "The Play" from *Fences*.
- Individually, students will free write their ideas about what the passage is conveying about the play.
- Students will read aloud scenes from *Fences* that address Troy's experiences with discrimination and his limits to self-determination. Returning to their small groups, students will discuss how the scenes relate to each other and what they reveal about Troy's worldviews and the relationships he forms with his family and friends.
- The class will discuss how Troy's experiences put him at a different place on "the starting line" from the white men in his same circumstances, in baseball and as a sanitation worker.

- As an exit slip, students will view the photo depicting 1968 Sanitation Workers holding signs with the words “I am a Man” made famous during the strike. Responding in the voice of Troy Maxson, what might he say about the image?

Lesson Activity Three: Creating an equitable starting line

- Students will do a quick write, responding to the quote “Born on third base and thinks he hit a triple.” What does this quote mean to them? Students will be invited to share responses. If students do not understand the quote, explain that it is an idiom about baseball that means that some people are born with advantages they are unaware of, that give them a head start in life. Discuss what some of these advantages are and why someone might be unaware of them.
- The class will discuss the questions, “What barriers have we set up as a society to limit the opportunities and self-determination of others?” and, “Are we all starting from the same point in the race of life?”
- In small groups, students brainstorm ideas for removing these barriers and creating a more equitable society. Each group will draft a vision statement and offer two solutions to share with the class at large.

Assessment: Teachers should assess participation in small and large group discussions based on their own standard for class discussion participation.

Exit Slip: Each student will complete a 3:2:1 exit slip. They will write:

- three things they learned about how discrimination shaped Troy Maxson’s worldview and relationships,
- two barriers that continue to limit equity in our society and
- one thing they will do to create a more equitable society.

Remind students that they can choose to respond to the last part of the Exit Slip with an effort they will make at the classroom level, school level, neighborhood level, city or beyond. It’s up to them where they want to start. There is no wrong answer!

I Am a Man Exit Slip



Sanitation Workers Strike, Memphis, Tennessee, March 28, 1968

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-37853.

Artist/Maker

Ernest Withers

American, 1922–2007

Date

1968

Responding in the voice of Troy Maxson, what might he say about the image?



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Fences Exit Slip

3	Things I Learned about the impact of discrimination on Troy Maxson's worldview and relationships • • •
2	Barriers that continue to limit equity in our society... • •
1	One thing I will do to create a more equitable society... •