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Fences

By August Wilson
Directed by Lou Bellamy
Presented by Cargill

August 21 through September 21, 2008
Previews August 19 & 20

TOOLS FOR TEACHING

The following are a series of questions you may use to prompt discussion, critical analysis or dialogue about this play. They may be used either before or after the play, either to guide audiences toward specific issues as they watch or, to stimulate conversation about topical issues afterward.

Penumbra Theatre Company now offers Lesson Plans that use the script, the production, and the study guide to investigate specific themes! Developed by high school teachers and curriculum consultants Kimberly Colbert and Kaye Peters, these questions are intended to meet the state standards for High School Language Arts and Literacy set by the Board of Education. (Grades 9 through 12). Each plan can run from approximately 15 to 45 minutes for discussion. Please contact Penumbra Theatre's Education Director, Sarah Bellamy, for more details: sarah.bellamy@penumbratheatre.org

A Guide for Teaching August Wilson's *Fences*

Overview

This guide provides a broad framework in which teachers may anchor their own classroom practice. For easy reference, lessons have been divided into five strands (mythology, literary study, themes, art and historical context). Teachers may choose to follow one strand for the unit or weave together elements and/or lessons from the various strands. A broad essential question for the entire *Fences* unit is suggested, as well as more specific essential questions aligned with strands (highlighted below). The essential question provides a foundation for study, with guiding questions for study imbedded in each lesson which will allow for a range of critical thinking and analysis within both English/language arts and social studies content areas. Anchor, or suggested, lessons are provided for each strand along with resource readings and classroom tools we have found effective in our own classrooms.

The suggested lessons are designed to meet high-school level Minnesota Reading and Literature and Writing standards and Minnesota Social Studies standards for Institutions and Traditions in Society. The standards are noted by the possible lessons in boldface type. Numbers and letters refer to the specific standard.

LA – is Language Arts standards

SS – is Social Studies standards

Both the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* printed by Gale Group and offered as an online database and *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*, edited by Christopher Bigsby, are valuable resources on Wilson's body of work and are cited in the commentary and essays that follow.

Teaching the Play

Unit Essential Question:

How does one define one's self within the larger expectations of society?

Mythology Essential Question:

How do the mythologies used by Wilson in *Fences* help to inform and codify the African American experience?

Literary Study Essential Question:

What literary aspects in *Fences* make it both a particularly African American and universal work of art?

Theme(s) Essential Questions:

Responsibility: What is our responsibility to ourselves vs. families and society?

African American identity: What are the effects of institutionalized racism on Americans of African descent who try to define themselves in a society where they receive little or no positive support?

Art and Arts Literacy Essential Question:

How does art help us to see and understand ourselves and the role we play in shaping society? (Lens of art creation and performance)

Suggested Summative Assessments for Each Section

1. The **guiding questions** associated with each strand provide good essay questions for a final unit assessment.
2. Students could present a scene from the play with an analysis of the scene and support for their interpretation of the scene and its significance. Presentation could be assessed on how well they supported their interpretation.
3. Research paper on the myths alluded to within the play.
4. Passage analysis.

Mythology

Essential Question: How do the mythologies used by Wilson in *Fences* help to inform and codify the African American experience?

“August Wilson has often been described as a dramatic historian because of his quest to document the experiences of African Americans in the twentieth century. In truth, though, he is no more a historian than Shakespeare. . . . He had altogether a different version of history in mind, one which sank its roots in mythology. It is there that he looked for the symbols, metaphors and tales that embodied and expressed the hopes, fears, aspirations, and religious and civic yearnings of communities who laid down their true history in legends, poems, songs, prayers and, in Wilson's hands, plays.

Wilson was alive to, and tapped into, African myths, often codified in music. He was a storyteller recounting the history of his people but, as he was aware, he was not alone in that. In some senses he played the role performed by the griot in West Africa whose function it was and is to recount the history of his tribe and thereby to preserve and celebrate it. In an African context history is deeply implicated in storytelling, song and myth.

Wilson was in this tradition. Devoid of their mythological dimensions, his characters, Levee [*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 1920s], Troy [*Fences*, 1950s] and Boy Willie [*The Piano Lesson*, 1930s], in their separate plays, are merely destructive forces at odds with their world instead of agents of change challenging the status quo and reordering their universe.” (Pereira 65)

By his own account, Wilson’s play cycle for each decade of the Twentieth Century *Fences* was intended to forge out of the African American experience a mythology that would both codify that experience and act as a catalyst for examination and growth beyond it. In doing so, Wilson follows a long tradition of not just the African griot but also classical Greek theater. As an objective, Greek playwrights such as Aeschylus and Sophocles crafted plays to show their fellow citizens human weakness and potential for growth. Like Wilson, they grounded their plays in their culture’s myths.

In *Fences*, Wilson weaves together allusions to African, Greek and American myths (particularly myths associated with baseball) that infuse the story of Troy Maxon to transcend, as Pereira notes, the story of a garbage collector who lives in Pittsburgh, drinks on Friday nights and cheats on his wife. In Wilson’s hands, Troy joins that pantheon of mythological figures with whom his name pointedly places him: the mythic hero.

Therefore, the mythic hero is the focus for the suggested lesson for this strand. Other myth-related lessons could focus on topics such as:

- Myth vs. History: What is the difference between the myths of Sundiata, King of Old Mali, or the Trojan War versus the histories upon which the myths are based? This draws a contrast between the documentable events of history and the literature that makes those events meaningful. Why are myths important?
(SS: Peoples and Cultures. LA: I.C. 1, 2, 4, 7, 10 and I.D. 3, 11, 12, 14)
- How do Greek, African and American baseball myths inform and develop Wilson’s play? Wilson includes multiple allusions to Greek myths (character names, the

hubris Troy exhibits in challenging Death, the storytelling structure present in Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, the allusion to Oedipus in Troy's blindness after he fights his father). The storytelling also closely links Troy to the griots of African culture who were the keepers of African history and mythology, as well as the Yoruba trickster hero Eshu. Finally, Wilson uses the mythology of baseball (concepts of fair play and meritocracy that make the game "all-American," mythic players such as Jackie Robinson and Babe Ruth) to challenge the fairness of Troy's fate.

(SS: Peoples and Cultures. LA: I.D. 3, 11, 12, 14)

A compendium of resources for these alternative studies is listed at the end of this strand.

Troy Maxon and the Mythic Hero Archetype

Sample Lesson: 2-4 Days

LA Standards: As noted below

SS (Peoples and Cultures) Standards:

- Identifying societal concepts that influence the interaction among individuals, groups, and institutions in society.

Guiding questions:

1. What is the significance of Troy's name?
2. What are the essential characteristics that define the mythic hero?
3. How are those characteristics present or not present within Troy?
4. What literary elements or structures help to develop Troy as a mythic hero?
5. How does Troy, as a mythic hero, develop meaning within the play?
6. How does Troy, as a mythic hero, help the audience's understanding of the experience of African Americans?
7. If Troy is a mythic hero, what contribution or sacrifice has he made for his society?
8. Is Troy a mythic hero or is he a tragic hero (a mythic hero with a fatal flaw)?

Preparatory Set: LA Standards I. A and B.1-2

This lesson is devised to be taught after reading *Fences*, but it could be broken in two with the preparatory set (study of mythical heroes) preceding reading or attending the play. The main lesson then could follow attending or reading the play. Study of the hero's journey before the play would give students markers to look for as they see or study the play itself.

Mythic hero - male or female and usually of remarkable birth, the hero is often the offspring of a god and human being, but also can be fully human. Heroes may be born under unusual circumstances, and show early signs of being special either through superhuman physical or mental strength or supernatural powers. The hero often emerges through a journey, also called a quest. (ex. Sundiata, Odysseus, Perseus, Hercules, Joan of Arc)

Folk hero – is often a very ordinary person who is scoffed at by siblings, parents or society. While lacking superhuman or supernatural powers, they may be out of the ordinary in other ways, such as being exceptionally kind, clever, or resourceful. (Johnny Appleseed, Daniel Boone, Babe Ruth, Harriet Tubman)

Hero's Journey/Quest – a journey taken in search of something of value. Joseph Campbell stresses that the hero is seeking something of value to larger society.

- Students should be familiar with the characteristics of the **mythic hero**, as opposed to a **folk hero** such as Johnny Appleseed. Very specific characteristics mark the mythic hero. They are illustrated below in the **hero's journey**:
 1. Mythology scholar Joseph Campbell defines a hero this way: "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself." The hero embarks on a journey where he matures as a hero. In an interview with Bill Moyers he adds, "The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there's something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society," (Campbell, 152). Campbell adds that the hero is human and, therefore, has weaknesses.
 2. The hero is often reluctant and encouraged to undertake his adventure.

3. The hero has friends or mentors who help him/her.
 4. The mythic hero has special tools or powers that elevate her/him beyond other humans.
 5. The hero is put through tests or trials to strengthen him or her for battle.
 6. The hero endures the supreme ordeal.
 7. There is an apotheosis where the hero's best qualities come together.
 8. The hero is resurrected and/or transformed by his/her experience.
- Sample mythical heroes could be assigned for students to research or the teacher could present hero stories to the students: Hercules, Odysseus, Achilles, Hector, Sundiata (Mali), Thor, Gilgamesh (Mesopotamia) and many more. Information could be presented in paper or oral report. **See sources at end of this lesson.** (LA: I.D.3, 12; II.D.1, 10, 11)
 - Student/modern hero stories. Students may create their own hero stories from their lives or lives of their contemporary heroes. How do the characteristics of the mythic hero in 1-8 above correlate to these modern stories? (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Helen Keller are examples of modern figures who have been portrayed as heroes as defined above.) (LA II.A)

Materials

Large paper for students to make charts to share
 Colored markers
 Tape or thumb tacks for posting charts
 Copies of *Fences* (at least one per group)

Lesson Outline

1. Begin with a class discussion of whether Troy embodies the characteristics of a hero. Focus on first impressions. What are his strengths and weaknesses? Teachers may wish to refer to the **guiding questions** for discussion. Students should draw on earlier mythologies and text to support their ideas. (LA I. D. 1, 4, 14)
2. Next, review the **hero's journey** and list on board for reference.
3. Directions for assignment: **LA: I.D. 1, 5, 6, 10, 12**
 - a. Divide students into groups. Students will need to remember their groups. Each group will need markers and paper to chart Troy's journey (may use exposition as well as play action), using the hero's journey for guidance. If he does not fit criteria, mark the step but ask students to leave it blank on their papers.
 - b. Each group will select a facilitator to ensure that everyone is heard and participates. Facilitators will evaluate group at end.
 - c. All steps of Troy's journey must make specific references to text with act and page numbers cited. (E.g. Act I, Scene 3; pages 36-37).
4. Once in groups, students should take 30 minutes to chart Troy's journey.
5. Post charts on walls for review by all groups.
6. Chalk Talk (this review may be scheduled for the following day if necessary)

- a. In their assigned groups, students will look at other charts and take turns writing comments for the group on each chart. Caution that students need to be respectful and ask questions or make comments that raise points for discussion.
 - b. Once groups have commented on all other charts, they should stay at the last chart (not their own).
 - c. Representatives of last group will read the comments aloud so all students hear the comments made on each group's chart.
7. Use students' comments to build discussion about whether Troy fits the profile of a mythic hero. Students should take notes during discussion, which can be framed around one or more of the **guiding questions** listed above. These questions can also be used for an essay as an end-of-unit assessment.

Reflection on unit and essential questions: (LA II.A.3)

Students journal on what they have learned about how we define ourselves in society and how myths help us to understand ourselves and society. Conclude with a final discussion pulling the elements of the mythic hero and Troy's experience together in response to these essential questions:

1. Does Troy embody the characteristics of the mythic hero?
2. What has he sacrificed and what has he brought to his people?
3. How does Troy help the audience understand the African American experience?
4. How does *Fences* parallel mythologies students know?
5. In the tradition of mythology, what does Troy's experience offer African Americans in terms of guidance for the future?
6. How does Troy's experience help students understand how one defines one's self within the larger expectations of society?

NOTE: These questions can also be used for an essay as an end-of-unit assessment.

Works Cited in Mythology Strand

- Campbell, Joseph and Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. Ed. Betty Sue Flowers. New York: First Anchor, 1991.
- Periera, Kim. "Introduction to August Wilson and the African American Odyssey." *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*. University of Illinois Press, 1995, 1–12. Contemporary Literary Criticism. 25 June 2008. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/GLD/hits>.
- Pereira, Kim. "Music and Mythology in August Wilson's Plays." *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*. Ed. Christopher Bigsby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 65-74.

Sources for alternative myth studies:

African and world mythologies

- Bierlein, J. F. *Parallel Myths*. New York: Ballantine, 1994.
- Campbell, Joseph and Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. Ed. Betty Sue Flowers. New York: First Anchor, 1991.
- Ford, Clyde W. *The Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa*. New York: Bantam, 2000.
- Myth Encyclopedia. <http://www.mythencyclopedia.com>
- Niane, D. T. *Sundiata an Epic of Old Mali*. New York: Longman, 2006.
- Wisniewski, David. *Sundiata: Lion King of Mali*. New York: Clarion, 1992.
(This is a paper-cut-illustrated children's book that poetically tells the story.)

Baseball mythology

- "Baseball and Its Myths." 20 July 2008. Online resource:
http://xroads.virginia.edu/~class/am483_97/projects/brady/myth.html.
- Elias, Robert. *Baseball and the American Dream*. Armonk NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001.
- Westbrook, Deanne. *Ground Rules: Baseball & Myth*. Champaign IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996.
- Koprince, Susan. "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's Fences." *African American Review*. Summer 2006. Bnet. 23 June 2008. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838.

Greek Mythology

Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. New York: Warner, 1999.

Homer. *The Iliad: The Fitzgerald Translation*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.

Homer. *The Odyssey: The Fitzgerald Translation*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

Sophocles. *Sophocles: The Oedipus Cycle*. Trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Harcourt, 1977.

Literary Study

Essential Question: What literary aspects in *Fences* make it both a particularly African American and universal work of art?

From the distinctive idioms and speech patterns of his characters that link them to the African American community to the larger symbols and metaphors that transcend any one group's identity, Wilson has fashioned a play that has appealed to audiences around the world. The play is full of potent features for literary study such as:

- How does Wilson tell his story? How is the oral tradition present within *Fences* and what is its effect? Here, comparisons could be drawn to the griots of Africa and the Greeks' Homer, both as they are present in Troy and the story the playwright himself is presenting. Griots or other cultural story tellers kept alive history before pen and paper were available or, in the case of African slaves or other oppressed peoples, when pen and paper were forbidden. Look at the oral tradition and consider how the tradition is present in the play. **(LA I.D.9, 10)**
- How does the set of the play affect its meaning? Students could explore the significance of the play being set in the Maxon's backyard **(LA I.D.6, 9)** and the props such as the rag ball and ball **(LA I.D.6, 9)**, and the symbolism of the fence **(LA I.D.5)**. Other elements of setting (time of day, entrances and exits, the alley) could also be examined.
- Conflict study: what is each of the main character's primary conflict? Review types of conflict: person v. self, person v. person, person v. society, person v. nature, person v. fate/God. Students will then describe each character's main type of conflict and support with five examples for each character in a journal. How does the conflict for each character develop that character? The play? **(LA I.D. 1, 6, 9, 10)**
- How is the play divided by acts and scenes and what is the effect in developing the play? **(LA I.D. 9, 10, 14)**
- How does Wilson's choice of language spoken by the characters help to develop the play (characterization, tone, rhythm, mood)? **(LA I.B.2 and I.D.1, 4, 14)** This requires students to look up unfamiliar words and consider the effects of idiom and register. Wilson wrestled with whether to use black English in his earlier plays. What is its effect here? How does it help to develop the play and the characters' voices?
- Where are Troy's stories in the play and what are their effects in the context of their placement? **(LA I.D.1, 10)**
- What is the significance of character names within the play?
- What role does Gabriel play in the development of the play and its meaning?
- What does it mean to have a "full count"? The metaphorical implications of baseball terminology and metaphors **(LA I.D 5)**
- Passage analysis: Personification

Personification is a term that ascribes human qualities to things that are not human, such as objects, feelings and concepts. Analyze the passage below for the effect of personification. What just happened to Troy? Why does he pick up the bat and assume a batting posture? What is the effect of his addressing Death as a person? What is the significance of the scene happening outside the fence?

TROY: I can't taste nothing. Helluljah! I can't taste nothing no more.

(TROY assumes a batting posture and begins to taunt Death, the fastball in the outside corner.)

Come on! It's between you and me now! Come on! Anytime you want! Come on! I be ready for you . . . but I ain't gonna be easy."

(The lights go down on the scene.)

Home and Fences: The Duality of Baseball Metaphors in *Fences*

Sample Lesson: 4 Days

LA Standards: **I.B.2** (vocabulary expansion) and **I.D.5** (figurative language).

Many literary devices add to the richness of *Fences*, but none perhaps more prominently than the allusions and metaphors grounded in baseball. Troy, who played in the Negro League, speaks in baseball metaphor and is bitter that he was not allowed to play in the major leagues. His experience with the sport and being barred because of race from the majors is a clear aspect of his character's identity. He is the "darker brother," the contrast to the myths surrounding the sport.

"The game of baseball has long been regarded as a metaphor for the American dream—an expression of hope, democratic values, and the drive for individual success. According to John Thorn, baseball has become 'the great repository of national ideals, the symbol of all that [is] good in American life: fair play (sportsmanship); the rule of law (objective arbitration of disputes); equal opportunity (each side has its innings); the brotherhood of man (bleacher harmony); and more'" (Koprince). Yet, Troy Maxon found baseball to be anything but fair. The metaphors then take on a certain irony in Wilson's *Fences*. Two particular metaphors are pregnant with meaning: home and fences. They are the focus of the sample lesson in metaphor for this strand.

Whether students are in ninth grade and just beginning to work with metaphor or are seniors with experience in deconstructing metaphors, looking at the metaphors of "home" and "fences" within *Fences* will provide a valuable lesson in the duality a metaphor can present and its effect on meaning within literature.

This lesson takes 4 days (2 days following act 1 and 1-2 days at the end of play).

Guiding Questions:

1. What is a metaphor?
2. What is a "home?"
3. In baseball terminology, what is "home" and its significance to the game?
4. What does it mean to be "safe at home?" What is a "home run?"
5. What is "home" to Troy Maxon?
6. What is a "fence"?
7. In baseball terminology, what are the "fences?" How are they important to the game? (see vocabulary section of the guide)
8. What is the significance of "fences" in this play?
9. How do these baseball terms of "home" and "fences" develop concepts within the play?
10. How do they heighten the audience's awareness of Troy Maxon's fate as an African American man?

Preparatory Set (Days 1-2):

Within context of studying Act I of the play, engage in a short classroom discussion on the student's connotations of the terms "home" and "fences."

Provide overview of following lesson. To understand the implications of a metaphor, start with the denotative meaning.

Materials:

Dictionaries (at least one per group)

Copies of *Fences* (at least one per group)
 Notebook paper and writing utensils for each student

Possible Lesson Outline:

1. Set up expert groups. To look at first the denotative and then the connotative meaning of these words, set up groups for a jigsaw as follows. The first “expert” groups will be a little large, but this arrangement will allow for smaller groups in the more significant “teaching” groups. Everyone must take notes in both groups. It is critical that everyone take notes in expert groups because they will have to teach the material in the second part of the activity. Sample notes will be collected for teacher review and evaluation at the end of the activity.
 - First will be the expert groups. Each of four expert groups will be responsible for looking up the denotative meaning of the words “home” and “fences” as follows and brainstorming a web of literal ways in which the term is used:
 - Group 1:** Home in the common sense.
 - Group 2:** Home as it is used in baseball.
 - Group 3:** Fences in the common sense.
 - Group 4:** Fences in baseball.
 - Students will count off by 4, random selection. These will be the expert groups.
 - Students should move to areas of the room designated for their group.
2. Students will look up the words and create webs. Then they should look at the following list of references from the play and connect these references to ideas they already placed on the web or add to their webs.

Home		Fences	
p. 9	“home runs” (Bono)	p. 21	“Jesus be a fence” (Rose)
p. 34	“Hell, I can hit forty-three homeruns right now!” (Troy)	p. 24	“put up the fence” (Bono)
p. 40	“You all line up at the door with your hands out” (Troy)	p. 30	“you supposed to be putting up this fence” (Rose)
		p. 31	“help me with this fence” (Troy)

3. In expert groups, students discuss and take notes on how the meaning of these two concepts take on metaphorical significance in the context of the text.
4. Set up teaching groups: In teaching groups, students will share what they learned and discussed in their expert groups. Both groups who looked at “home” should present, followed by both “fences” groups.
 - Students will count off by the number of students that are in the smallest group. If there are extras in another group, they can be distributed among the reformed “teaching” groups. Relocated to designated area of room.
Students should write both their teaching and expert group numbers on their notes.

5. Group presentations.
6. Group discussion. Drawing on their presentations, students will discuss and take notes on the following questions (write on board or overhead):
 - What does “home” mean to Troy?
 - How does the Maxson home relate to “home” in baseball?
 - What do you believe is the purpose of the fence Rose wants around the Maxson yard?
 - What is the objective of a hitter in baseball when he “hits for the fences”?
7. Select one person from each discussion group to turn in their notes, balancing between the four expert groups to get a representative sample. All students should keep notes.

Preparatory set (Days 3-4):

Refer students to their notes from **Days 1-2** and give students five minutes to review. Follow with short discussion on what they find significant about the concepts of “home” and “fences.”

Lesson Outline:

1. Students should return to their teaching groups and look at the following text from Act II. What are the metaphorical implications raised?
 - p. 60: Troy and Bono discuss building the fence and what material is needed.
 - p. 61: “I don’t see why Mama want a fence around the yard nowadays.” (Cory)
 - p. 61: “some people build fences to . . . keep people in.” (Bono)
 - p. 64: “I wanna see you put that fence up by yourself.” (Bono)
 - p. 68-9: “I can step out of this house . . .” (Troy)
 - p. 69: Troy’s baseball analogy explaining his attraction to Alberta. “safe” at home.
 - p. 70: “steal second” (Troy)
 - p. 77: “build me a fence” (Troy)
 - p. 79: “homeless” Troy brings Raynell home and begs Rose to take her in.
 - p. 94: “He wasn’t satisfied hitting in the seats. . . he want to hit it over everything!” (Lyons speaking about Troy, his father, when he played baseball.)
 - p. 95-6: Troy died swinging the bat as Rose was going into house. (Rose)
2. Metaphors can reveal the complexity or duality of a concept. Consider the dual meaning of “home” and “fences” in *Fences* and discuss the following questions:

- a. What Troy Maxon “safe at home”?
- b. How does the restriction implied by the fence Troy builds around the Maxon house compare to his goal as a ballplayer?
- c. How do these two metaphors develop your awareness of Troy Maxon’s fate as an African American man?

Reflection:

Students should write a short reflection, including how the metaphors helped them to understand Troy Maxon and the meaning of the play.

Work Cited in Literary Study Strand

Koprince, Susan. “Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson’s *Fences*.” *African American Review*. Summer 2006. Bnet. 23 June 2008.
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838.

Themes: Responsibility

Essential Question: What is our responsibility to ourselves vs. families and society?

At the heart of *Fences* is a question that transcends race: “What does a man owe to his family, and how much can a man, . . . permit himself to ignore duty in order to pursue more self-interested objectives?” (Blumenthal). Troy Maxon, the protagonist of Wilson’s play, through his diction, repeatedly stresses the virtue of responsibility to his sons and wife. “I done learned my mistake and learned to do what’s right by it. You still trying to get something for nothing. Life don’t owe you nothing. You owe it to yourself,” he tells his oldest son, Lyons, early in the play (18; 1).

Yet Lyons, in his quest to be a musician, and Troy, through his philandering, show that responsibility is easier to talk about than uphold. In what could be the climax of the play, Troy squares off with his wife, Rose, after informing her that he has gotten another woman pregnant. In explaining why he slept with Alberta, he tells Rose “I done locked myself into a pattern trying to take care of you all that I forgot about myself” (69; 2).

As Blumenthal notes in her essay, the question of responsibility has more challenges when the individual is an African-American man in pre-Civil Rights America, but Troy and Rose’s debate over responsibility at the beginning of act 2 also has a universal dimension that begs the question of to whom and for whom we must be responsible.

The following lesson is designed for the end of the play to help students pull together concepts and themes within the play and support them with text.

Fish Bowl Discussion: To Whom Are We Most Responsible?

Sample Lesson: 2 days

LA Standards: I.D. 1, 13, 14.

SS (Peoples and Cultures) Standards:

- A. Identifying societal concepts that influence the interaction among individuals, groups, and institutions in society.
- B. Examining tension between individuality and conformity.

Guiding Questions:

1. What is our responsibility to ourselves?
2. What is a parents’ responsibility to his or her children?
3. What is a husband’s or wife’s responsibility to his or her spouse?
4. What is our responsibility to our community or society?
5. What do we do when these responsibilities are in conflict?

Preparatory Set:

As noted above, this lesson is designed to fall at the end of the unit. Begin with a journal question for students: “To whom do we most owe responsibility? Ourselves, our family or our community?” Follow with informal discussion.

Materials:

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Notepaper and writing utensils.

For day 2, room needs to be organized with four chairs at center, in a circle and facing each other.

Other chairs will be lined up behind the four chairs for supporting group members.

Lesson Outline:

Day 1:

1. Set up lesson: Students will debate the question posed for journal, using text from the play to support their arguments. The first day will be used for four groups (to reduce sizes of groups, break family into parents/children and husband/wife as in guiding questions) to find text to support their arguments in favor of self, child, spouse or society. The second day will be a fish bowl discussion where a representative from each group will argue the group's position and try to persuade the others, using specific text from the play to support their position. Other members of the same group may tag out the speaker (details below).
2. Students will vote with feet, moving to designated areas of room as to whether they think their greatest responsibility is to themselves, their children, their spouse or their society.
3. If group numbers are significantly uneven, teacher should adjust or, if very lopsided, teacher can randomly assign groups to argue a position whether they believe it or not. (Good practice for seeing an issue from another's perspective.)
4. Give students remainder of the hour to look up text together and build their argument. Everyone should take notes both in groups and during discussion (could collect at end, with reflection). Students should be encouraged to also review play on their own for homework.

Day 2:

1. Set up discussion: Speakers representing each group will sit in center four desks (the fish bowl). Each speaker must be allowed to talk at least once. Once they have spoken, however, a member of his/her group may tag them to take over the chair and speak. Speakers may return to the center. All speakers **MUST** cite the play in supporting their argument and everyone must listen and take notes. Points may be given for notes, with extra credit for speaking, or as teacher sees fit.
2. Give groups five minutes to review arguments and text and any additional information. Choose first speaker.
3. Fish bowl discussion, as set out in 1. 20-30 minutes.
4. Students will write a reflection summarizing their position, given what they have heard and citing how the play supports their final position. They may also reflect on how they arrived at their position.
5. Hand in reflections (notes optional) to teacher.

Themes: African American Identity

Essential Question: What are the effects of institutionalized racism? What is institutionalized racism's legacy on the individual, families and society? On someone who is trying to define him/herself?

Standards: I.D.4, I.D.5, I.D.7, I.D.9, I.D.10, I.D.11, I.D.13, I.D.14

Several literary elements including setting, plot, and diction help to define the African American identity in August Wilson's *Fences*. Students will explore several devices in order to explore the way in which Wilson deals with the central idea of African American identity.

Racism is a common theme in August Wilson's plays chronicling the African American experience. (Political Science)

Racism: discrimination against a group of people based on their distinct physical characteristics and common ancestry.

Institutionalized Racism: racism that is codified through government or other societal structures either explicitly or implicitly.

Guiding Questions:

1. What does the setting of the play suggest about the Maxon's place in society? Why?
2. What evidence of Jim Crow and institutionalized racism is present within the play?
3. What factors blocked Troy Maxon's opportunities to play professional baseball?
4. Why can Troy not drive a garbage truck?
5. What is the significance of Troy winning the right to drive a truck?
6. How do Troy's experiences affect his relationships with his family and friends?
7. Why does Troy oppose Cory playing football to get a college scholarship?
8. How are the larger effects of Troy's experiences with racism presented within the play?

Examples of institutionalized racism in *Fences*:

- Baseball
- Garbage collection and driving
- Troy's put downs of his sons' ambitions
- Troy's desire to feel unstuck

Textual Examples (for teacher)

- Wilson's introduction to the play.
- **Act I, Scene I;** conversation between Troy, Rose and Bono.

TROY: I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football. (p. 8)

- **Act I, Scene I;** conversation between Troy, Rose and Bono.

ROSE: Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. That was before the war. Times have changed a lot since then.

TROY: How in hell they done changed?

ROSE: They got lots of colored boys playing ball now. Baseball and football.

BONO: You right about that, Rose. Times have changed, Troy. You just come along too early.

TROY: There ought not never have been no time called too early! (p. 9)

- **Act I, Scene I.** Troy's story about not being able to get credit to buy furniture. (p. 14-15)

- **Act I, Scene I.**

LYONS: Aw, Pop, you know I can't find no decent job. Where am I gonna get a job at? You know I can't get no job. . . . I don't wanna be carrying nobody's rubbish. (p. 17)

- **Act I, Scene I.**

TROY: I done learned my mistake and learned to do what's right by it. You still trying to get something for nothing. Life don't owe you nothing. You owe it to yourself. (p. 18)

Materials:

Large sheets of paper, one for each guiding question.

Markers, one for each member of cooperative group.

“Chalk Talk” Discussion:

1. Divide class into eight groups – one group for each guiding question.
2. Instruct students to discuss their guiding question on, marking answers and textual evidence on the large white paper.
3. Let them know the exercise will be timed.
4. After the allotted time, ask students to pass the paper to the next group.
5. Students should review the new question and answers and respond in writing to points that resonate with them by drawing a line from the comment to another part of the paper and writing their response.
6. Allow about six minutes for responses and have students pass their papers to the next group.
7. Continue to do this until each group receives their original paper again.
8. Briefly review guiding questions and answers.

Note: (Chalk Talk is a strategy developed by Brown University's Arts Literacy Project. More information can be found at artslit.org, “Handbook” section.)

Seminar: Students will discuss the **essential questions**. Questions should be assigned as written homework before the seminar is held.

Procedures:

Set up the room in a way that allows students to have a large-group discussion as well as provide a place for those who come to class unprepared, to finish their work.

Check student's homework as they enter the room. Send students who come prepared to a place in the discussion circle. Others should take a seat in the other part of the classroom and finish their homework. They may join the circle when they are finished.

Review ground rules for seminar:

- no talking over the discussion
- no talking under the discussion (e.g. whispering) or having side conversations
- students should raise their hands to comment
- students should try to speak in full sentences and/or paragraphs (to practice communicating complete thoughts)
- students should refer to each other by name
- the teacher facilitates only when necessary; the discussion belongs to the students.

Begin the seminar by allowing each student in the circle to answer one of the questions. This way no one dominates and student who are more shy are forced to participate. You can open the discussion for further comments after the round robin has finished. At this point, the teacher steps in only to remind students of ground rules, ask for textual evidence or briefly jump-start silence. In general, however, students can be trusted to fill pregnant pauses.

When you begin the response part of the discussion, read the essential question and step back to let the students take over. Every once in awhile it might be necessary to call on people who are not responding to draw them into the discussion.

Continue to answer the questions throughout the class period. You might want to debrief the process or have kids respond to the process itself on paper before they leave.

Work Cited in Themes Section

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Art and Arts Literacy

Essential Question: How does art help us to see and understand ourselves and the role we play in shaping society?

Standards: D4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14.

As an artist, August Wilson credits the influence of a number of artistic forms that helped him weave together his complex account of African American life. In this unit, students will explore some of the artistic forms that make up the warp and weft of Wilson's work. They will also study the role of the artist in addressing issues of identity and the way in which art shapes the world in which they live.

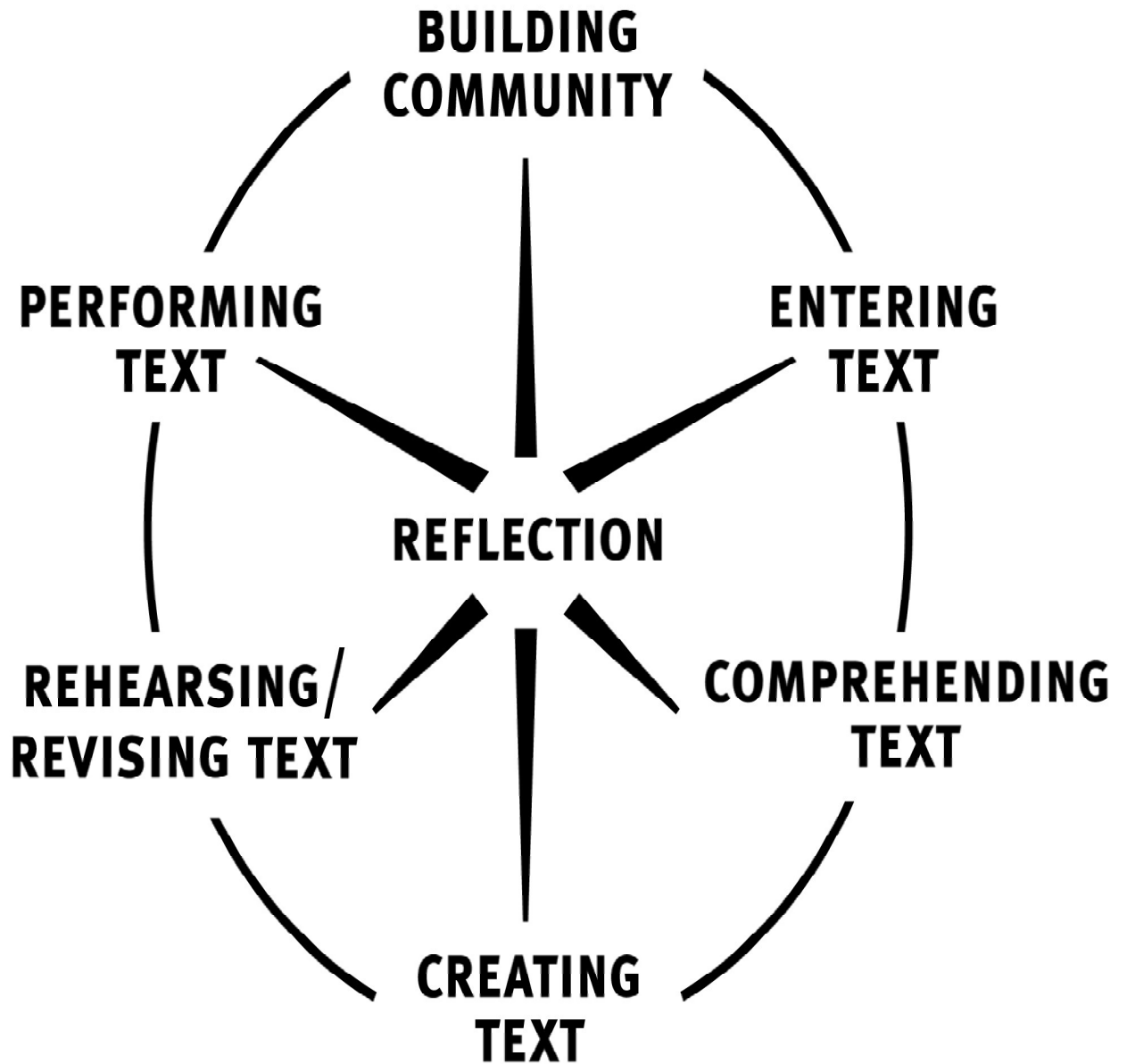
“I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground
of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood
and bones of the men and women who can be described as warriors on the
cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth.” (Elam, PAGE)

“There ought never have been no time called too early.”
(Troy Maxon, *Fences*, Act 1, Scene 1; p. 16)

Note: Brown University's Arts Literacy Project developed methods for approaching literacy through the performing and visual arts. Arts Literacy provides a way to meaningfully incorporate the arts into lesson plans. The method is based on a cycle – The Performance Cycle -- which allows students to encounter the text in a variety of ways. As students continue to study text using arts literacy they are brought deeper into words and meaning, while at the same time create their own art. At the center of the cycle is reflection, a time to think about not only what they have learned, but the way in which they have learned it. (For more details see “handbook” on artslit.org)



The Performance Cycle



Exercise: Community Building--Human Atom

- **Structure: investigating *Fences* through African American poetry.** This lesson can be used as a preparation to reading the play. For this activity the teacher should remain out of the activity on the side of the room.

Materials:

Music

CD player

Copies of the following texts: (available at end of section)

DuBois, W.E.B. "My Country 'Tis of Thee."

Giovanni, Nikki. "Dreams."

Hughes, Langston. "I, Too."

Wilson, August. *Fences* excerpt Act I; Scene I**Preparation:**

Mapping out the various phrases you will use throughout this activity is important. Read through the text and think of different situations you can take the students through that give a feel for the characters and their dilemmas. Write down specific phrases from the text you can use after, "Walk as if you . . ." For instance, using a phrase from the poem, "Dreams" by Nikki Giovanni, you might say "Walk as if you grew and matured and became more sensible."

Also, develop a list of words that capture the essence of the play to create statues around. For *Fences* these words might include: **equality**, **oppression**, and **dream**. These words incorporate central ideas from both the play and the poetry. You also might find critical images and phrases from the texts for statues, such as "I am the darker brother," from Langston Hughes' poem "I, Too."

Description:

Students walk around a space and inhabit different physicalities and emotions. There are many variations of this activity – some are designed to build community, and some to enter text. Often, teachers begin with the community-building variations to warm students up before starting to add in themes, characters, and quotes from the text. Thus, Human Atom can help you to achieve multiple purposes.

Procedure:

The basic movement of this activity is simple. Students should walk around the space and keep the room balanced. Choose a point at the center of the room and point out that it is the "Nucleus." All of the students in the room are the "electrons;" they will walk around the center of the nucleus, walk to a far point in the room, back to the nucleus, and then back out to another far point in the room. If the room is large and there are only a few participants, delineate a smaller space with chairs or tape.

Another option for walking around the room is for participants to picture a shape in their head and to imagine that shape is taped onto the floor around the entire room. They can trace the shape as they walk throughout the room.

During the activity it is important that none of the students talk to each other or make physical contact unless instructed. Ask the students to move around the room in random patterns, they often want to move in a continuous circle. Once the activity begins, teachers can mix any of the following activities:

Freeze: “When I say the word **freeze**, everyone in the room should freeze and not move any part of the body, including eyes and fingers.” This can be a good option to regain control of the activity or to use for transitions.

Friendship: “When I say the word **friendship**, everyone should introduce themselves to one another.” Try it also in slow motion and fast forward, with the participants introducing themselves to new people each time.

Situations: Walk the participants through situations related to the text, both physical and emotional. For instance from *Fences*: “You just had an argument with your father, who would rather you find a trade or some kind of work instead of going to college on a sports scholarship. Let your body show how you feel.”

Statues: “When I say a word, form a statue of that word.” Select words from the text. As the group forms statues, push them to make their statues “twice as big, now as big as you can make it,” to add levels to the room, to increase commitment or energy amongst the students.

Reflection: (handbook artslit.org)

1. Based on all of the experiences you had and the statues you created with words, what do you think this text might be about?
2. How did people interpret the text differently in their statues?
3. Which situation made you feel the best?
4. Which was the most painful?
5. Which words were the easiest to physicalize? Which were the most difficult?

Exercise: Entering Text with Line Tableaus: This serves as a warm-up to the comprehending text exercise.

- **Structure: investigating *Fences* through African American poetry.** This lesson can be used as a preparation to reading the play. For this activity the teacher should remain out of the activity on the side of the room.

Procedure:

The basic movement of this activity is simple. Take one line from each text, such as the following:

“There ought not never have been a time called too early.”
“I am the darker brother. They send me to each in the kitchen.”
“black people aren’t suppose to dream”
“My country ‘tis of thee, late land of slavery.”

As students walk in around the room, shout out a line. Students randomly join groups around the room to create a tableau. Or perhaps they might choose to create a large tableau. Coach them to being aware of physically connecting to others in the room in creative and individual ways: creating different body shapes, using different levels.

Museum: Allow a couple of people to leave each time a tableau is created to view the sculpture(s). Tell them that as long as they haven’t had the chance to observe they can look. Limit it to a few people each time. Others who remain in the tableaus should “fill in” the area where others have left.

Reflection: (handbook artslit.org)

1. Based on all of the experiences you had and the statues you created with words, what do you think this text might be about?
2. How did people interpret the text differently in their tableaus?
3. Which situation made you feel the best?
4. Which was the most painful?
5. Which words were the easiest to physicalize? Which were the most difficult?

Exercise: Comprehending Text, Creating Text

- **Structure: investigating *Fences* through textual analysis and interpretation.**
This lesson should be used after or while reading the play. For this activity the teacher should remain out of the activity on the side of the room.

Procedure:

Form four groups.

Assign each group a poem or passage from the play.

Each group should read their passage and choose four lines they find to be significant.

The group should then narrow the list of lines to four by voting.

Students should create a tableau for each line. Each line should be recited by the group, using repetition, chorus, echo, sound and movement to enhance the visual.

After tableaus are created, students should create a performance piece, moving fluidly from one tableau to the next.

Reflection: (handbook artslit.org)

1. Based on all of the experiences you had and the statues you created with lines from the text, what do you think this play might be about?
2. How did people interpret the text differently in their tableaus?
3. Why and how did you select one line over another to interpret?
4. Did adding movement help you think differently about the plot? If so, how?
5. Which lines were the easiest to physicalize? Which were the most difficult?

Exercise: Rehearsing and Performing Text

- **Structure: investigating *Fences* through textual analysis and interpretation.** This lesson should be used after reading the play. It may be used after students experience the **Comprehending Text, Creating Text Exercise**. For this activity the teacher should remain out of the activity on the side of the room.

Procedure:

Have each group take a space in the room.

After a brief countdown, each group should run through their performance piece.

Instruct students to hold their final tableau for about 10 seconds and then sit down quietly until everyone finishes their rehearsal.

Circle performance: Run through each performance piece individually so that each group presents their performance. (To save time and keep the atmosphere comfortable, students should remain in their part of the room and simply direct their focus to the performers).

Instruct students to again hold their last tableau for 10 seconds and then sit quietly.

As one group sits, the next group moves into place for performance.

Hold all applause until the end.

Final Reflection

With pen/pencil and paper, students should find a quiet space in the room. Choosing their favorite line from the original poem/excerpt. They should use the line as a prompt to write their own poem.

Students should reflect in writing on the guiding and essential questions: How does art help us to see and understand ourselves and the role we play in shaping society?

Art and Arts Literacy

Essential Question: How does art help us to see and understand ourselves and the role we play in shaping society?

Standards: D4, D5, D7, D9, D10, D11, D13, D14.

In this unit, students will discuss the rhythm and meter of excerpts from *Fences* in an effort to discover the music and poetry in Wilson’s writing. Although the Blues were a major influence in Wilson’s writing, we have deliberately avoided activities in which students create their own blues songs in order to channel their thinking toward the inherent complexity behind the influence of this art form on Wilson’s prose.

“Wilson validates the vernacular that is inherently musical. . . yet and still the trope of black musicality is often too generalized, too overused, too overdetermined to the point that it has become essentialized, limiting black people to the stereotypical claims that ‘we all got rhythm.’ The expectation that we can all sing and dance. . . At the same time, [Wilson] subverts the stereotype by exploring the pain, as well as the pleasure within the performance.”

“They sing now as survivors, recalling that past . . . Their *a capella* ode is thus time bound and yet transcendent, triumphant and yet tragic. It is a communal, dichotomous moment that contains ‘both a wail and a whelp of joy.’” (Elam)

“Musical instruments, blues songs, recurring lyrical tropes represent, embody and express the “souls of black folks.” (Elam)

Guiding Question:

1. In what way do blues songs convey both pain and joy? (Be careful to consider not only words, but melody, tempo and other elements of music.)
2. What effect does the recurrence of the song, “Old Blue,” have on the play? Keep in mind that the song is revealed throughout the play in increments. Discuss the significance of this.
3. What is the effect of the diction (word choice) and syntax Wilson uses in Troy’s story about his father? Identify significant words, phrases or devices (e.g. repetition) and discuss the way in which it helps to shape your understanding of Troy as a character, as an African American man.
4. Compare and contrast the use of song and story in the play, concentrating in particular on “Old Blue,” and the story about Troy’s father. What do we learn about society from each method of expression? Is one method more effective than the other? Why or why not?
5. Troy received the song, “Old Blue,” from his father and passes it on to his children. He also, in a sense, passes on the story of his father. What impact do you believe this legacy has on his children? What impact will it have on future generations?

Materials:

Excerpts from *Fences*:

- “Old Blue,” Act II, Scene 5
- Troy’s story about his father in Act I, Scene 4.

Anticipatory Set:

Teacher might want to play a blues song for students, pointing out the meter, rhyme scheme and elements like repetition and tone. Allow time for students to discuss their impressions about the song. Most importantly, students should understand that all language has rhythm and that meter is rhythm that can be measured. It might be a good idea to have students map out the meter and rhyme scheme of the blues song they listened to.

Small Group Discussion:

- Allow students to respond to guiding questions in writing before breaking them up into groups in order to allow students who might be quieter to process their answers on their own.
- Break students into groups of four. Assign roles: facilitator, recorder, researcher (person who helps find textual evidence) and reporter.
- Students should discuss their responses to the guiding questions. The teacher may also choose to assign one question per group. Make sure students support their answers with textual evidence.
- Each group reports to the class, their responses to the essential question(s).

Final Reflection (Journal):

Think of a song, story or book that has impacted your life. It can be something passed down from a family member or something introduced to you by a friend. Write about why you believe the song or story carries emotional significance for you.

Discussion:

Revisit the essential question. Help students make connections between their discussion and the question.

Art and Arts Literacy Final Activity

This final activity will allow students to reflect on the entire play. The procedures are the same as the activity on African American identity activity so students should be familiar with the procedures. Seminar questions should be assigned as homework.

Seminar Questions:

1. Based on your understanding of the play, explain why August Wilson titled it, *Fences*. Remember that you should think about the central idea of the drama and about the title in both figurative and symbolic terms. Was this play really about a fence, or was it about something else? How do you know?
2. If you were to change the title of the play, what title would you give it and why?
3. Write down a single line from the play that you believe to be extremely important. Briefly explain why that line is essential/important/significant.
4. Write one question about the play. Your question can be about a character, scene or literary aspect. Your question must begin with the words, "why might" or "what might."
5. Choose one idea from the play that you believe would make the world a better place if people would understand it. Explain your answer.

Procedures:

1. Set up the room in a way that allows students to have a large-group discussion as well as provide a place for those who come to class unprepared, to finish their work.
2. Check student's homework as they enter the room. Send students who come prepared to a place in the discussion circle. Others should take a seat in the other part of the classroom and finish their homework. They may join the circle when they are finished.
3. Review ground rules for seminar:
 - no talking over the discussion
 - no talking under the discussion (e.g. whispering) or having side conversations
 - students should raise their hands to comment
 - students should try to speak in full sentences and/or paragraphs (to practice communicating complete thoughts)
 - students should refer to each other by name
 - the teacher facilitates only when necessary; the discussion belongs to the students.
4. Begin the seminar by allowing each student in the circle to answer one of the questions. This way no one dominates and student who are more shy are forced to participate. You can open the discussion for further comments after the round robin has finished. At this point, the teacher steps in only to remind students of ground rules, ask for textual evidence or briefly jump-start silence. In general, however, students can be trusted to fill pregnant pauses.

5. When you begin the response part of the discussion, read the essential question and step back to let the students take over. Every once in awhile it might be necessary to call on people who are not responding to draw them into the discussion.
6. Continue to answer the questions throughout the class period. You might want to debrief the process or have kids respond to the process itself on paper before they leave.

 Supplemental Texts for Art and Arts Literacy Section

My Country 'Tis of Thee by W.E.B. DuBois

Of course you have faced the dilemma: it is announced, they all smirk and rise. If they are *ultra*, they remove their hats and look ecstatic; then they look at you. What shall you do? *Noblesse oblige*; you cannot be boorish, or ungracious; and too, after all it is your country and you *do* love its ideals if not all of its realities. Now, then, I have thought of a way out: Arise, gracefully remove your hat, and tilt your head. Then sing as follows, powerfully and with deep unctioin. They'll hardly note the little changes and their feelings and your conscience will thus be saved:

My country 'tis of thee,
 Late land of slavery,
 Of thee I sing.
 Land where my father's pride
 Slept where my mother died,
 From every mountain side
 Let freedom ring!

My native country thee
 Land of the slave set free,
 Thy fame I love.
 I love thy rocks and rills
 And o'er thy hate which chills,
 My heart with purpose thrills,
 To *rise* above.

Let laments swell the breeze
 And wring from all the trees
 Sweet freedom's song.
 Let laggard tongues awake,
 Let all who hear partake,
 Let Southern silence quake,
 The sound prolong.

Our fathers' God to thee
 Author of Liberty,
 To thee we sing
 Soon may our land be bright,
 With Freedom's happy light
 Protect us by Thy might,
 Great God our King.

W. E. B. Du Bois, "My Country 'Tis of Thee" from *Creative Writings by W. E. B Du Bois* (KrausThomson Organization Limited, 1985).

Reprinted with the permission of the Estate of W. E. B. Du Bois. Source: *Creative Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois* (1985). poetryfoundation.org

Dreams by Nikki Giovanni

in my younger years
before i learned
black people aren't
suppose to dream
i wanted to be
a raelet
and say "dr o wn d in my youn tears"
or "tal kin bout tal kin bout"
or marjorie hendricks and grind
all up against the mic
and scream
"baaaaaby nightandday
baaaaaby nightandday"
then as i grew and matured
i became more sensible
and decided i would
settle down
and just become
a sweet inspiration

Nikki Giovanni, "Dreams" from *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment*. Copyright © 1968, 1970 by Nikki Giovanni. Used with the permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Source: *The Collected Poems of Nikki Giovanni* (2003).
poetryfoundation.org

I, Too by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes, "I, Too" from *Collected Poems*. Copyright © 1994 by The Estate of Langston Hughes. Reprinted with the permission of Harold Ober Associates Incorporated.

Source: *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2004).
poetryfoundation.org

***Fences* by August Wilson (Excerpt from Act I: Scene I)**

ROSE: Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. You just come along too early.

TROY: There ought not never have been no time called too early . . .

ROSE: They got a lot of colored baseball players now. Jackie Robinson was the first. Folks had to wait for Jackie Robinson.

TROY: I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball better then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play. . . then they ought to have let you play.

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