



International Journal of Contemporary Research In Multidisciplinary

Review Article

A Comparative Study of August Wilson's Play Fences and Robert Frost's Mending Wall

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Abstract

This study aims to present a comparative analysis of August Wilson's play *Fences* and Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall*. Both works explore the theme of boundaries, but they do so in different contexts and with varying interpretations. *Fences* uses the physical structure of a fence as a central metaphor for the emotional and relational barriers Troy Maxson constructs around himself and his family, reflecting the racial and personal limitations of the 1950s. In contrast, *Mending Wall* centres on the physical wall between two neighbours, prompting reflection on tradition, human connection, and the broader implications of maintaining boundaries.

Manuscript Information

- **ISSN No:** 2583-7397
- **Received:** 10-12-2024
- **Accepted:** 28-12-2024
- **Published:** 30-12-2024
- **IJCRM:**3(6); 2024: 210-212
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- **Plagiarism Checked:** Yes
- **Peer Review Process:** Yes

How to Cite this Manuscript

Chandana B. A comparative study of August Wilson's play *Fences* and Robert Frost's *Mending Wall*. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2024;3(6):210-212.

KEYWORDS: Fences and Mending Wall, IASTM (Instrument-Assisted Soft Tissue Mobilization), Foam Roller, Calf Muscle Pain, Female Hockey Players, Sports Physiotherapy

1. INTRODUCTION

August Wilson's play *Fences* explores the complexities of family relationships, racial inequality, and the lasting impact of past experiences on present lives, particularly through the character of Troy Maxson. Similarly, Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall* examines the concept of boundaries, physical and metaphorical, and questions their necessity and effect on human connection. "Good fences make good neighbours" sounds good as a proverb, but all proverbs are true every time. Proverbs sometimes give us the idea to come out of a difficult situation. This proverb holds well in literature, and Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall* is the best example. In my paper, I have tried to compare this poem

with August Wilson's play *Fences*. The idea of the fence is slightly different in these two works. The fences make the barrier between the countries and between the people more and more complex. The word 'fence' gives the idea to the listener to separate, to protect themselves from enemies, so that they may not have to bridge the gap between their rivals, whether in fields or any country's border area. Though the proverb looks simply, it has complex meanings. As an Indian proverb says that "Love your neighbour, but do not throw down the dividing wall." Similarly, there is a Russian proverb: "Love your neighbours, but put up a fence." Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall* reflects on societal dynamics through a rural setting, likely inspired by the

English or New England countryside. The poem can be interpreted from various perspectives - folkloric, friendly, or even adversarial. It tells the story of two neighbours who annually mend a wall that arguably serves no real purpose, prompting deeper reflection on the nature of boundaries and human relationships. In contrast, August Wilson's play *Fences* centres around Troy Maxson, an African-American man who once aspired to be a professional baseball player but was denied the opportunity due to racial discrimination. The title *Fences* refers to the physical fence Troy is building in his backyard, which also serves as a powerful metaphor. The fence symbolizes not only division and emotional barriers but also love, protection, and the desire to hold one's family together. Ultimately, the play highlights the struggles, aspirations, and talents of African-Americans, particularly in the context of sports and social limitations.

August Wilson was influenced by Amiri Baraka, Blues music, Romare Bearden and Borges, whereas Robert Frost was very close to Georgian poets. Both writers were not interested in politics. Frost's poems are symbolical and have different meaning. For example: *Stopping by the woods on a Snowy evening*.

He writes:

"Woods are lovely, dark, and deep
But I have promises to keep,"

Robert Frost is a modern American poet who describes in his poems the real life in rustic language like that of Wordsworth. Similarly, August Wilson collects themes or the stories that are around him, like coffee shops, railway stations, mess, public places, Pat's place, and cigar shops. Both writers have understood the feelings of a common man. They lost their fathers at an early age. Wilson was a high school dropout, whereas Frost also found college life uninteresting and hence withdrew from studies. They were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for their outstanding works.

The word fence reminds me of different barriers like the Kashmir territory, which has become a bone of contention between India and Pakistan. There is the Great Wall of China and also the demarcation line called and Dixon line. The terrorist attacks from Pakistan to India have been reduced due to the border control fence. Even now, once in a few years, repair work on the damaged border fence goes on. To avoid terrorists' entry into other countries, a fence or tight security is essential. As the snow melts, the repair work goes on now and then. We also see the border dispute between the four states of America, i.e., Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and West Virginia. For many centuries, the Great Wall has acted as a protective wall of China and prevented enemies from entering into it. In Frost's poem *Mending Wall*, the repair of the wall goes on in the spring season, where the two persons meet. In this poem, the wall is either destroyed naturally or by animals. If there was faith between the speaker and his neighbour, construction or mending of the wall was not required.

In the play '*Fences*', there are many themes like race, mortality, hopes, dreams, betrayal, and dissatisfaction. Troy Maxson is the protagonist of the play and the father of Cory Maxson. They

spend a lot of time building a fence. Towards the end, we see that the fence is complete. Fence has different meanings, and hence it is a complex symbol. Due to racial discrimination, Troy Maxson was kept away from being a baseball player. So, he refuses to let his son Cory go to college on a football scholarship. He doesn't want his son to face the same problem. Thus, Cory's dreams were destroyed. From the beginning, Troy is seen neglecting to construct the fence. He scolds Cory for not doing work properly. Most of the time he goes to see his other wife, Alberta. Hence, Cory complains that the fencing work is getting delayed. His negligence of constructing a fence shows his neglect of his family. Troy's first wife, Rose tries most of the time to keep things in, whereas Troy tries to keep things out. Here we see the difference in characters. In this play fence is seen as a dividing line between the father and the son. After the death of Alberta, Troy being depressed says that he is going to build himself a fence around the yard and around what belongs to him. But in *Mending Wall*, we see that the neighbour says

"Good fences make good neighbours"

An Overview of Fences and Mending Wall

This comparative study examines August Wilson's play *Fences* and Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall*, focusing on their exploration of boundaries—both literal and symbolic. While *Fences* delves into themes of racial inequality, family dynamics, and personal barriers through the life of Troy Maxson, *Mending Wall* contemplates the role of physical and emotional separation between individuals in a rural setting. Despite their different genres and historical contexts, both works interrogate the reasons behind the walls people build whether to protect, isolate, or connect and offer profound insights into human relationships and societal norms. This study aims to highlight how each author uses the motif of a barrier to convey deeper truths about identity, connection, and division.

Fences

- **Family Dynamics:** The play delves into the strained relationships within the Maxson family, highlighting the generational differences and the consequences of Troy's choices on his wife Rose and sons Cory and Lyons.
- **Racial Inequality:** *Fences* address the systemic racism prevalent in 1950s America, particularly in the context of sports and employment opportunities for African Americans.
- **Impact of the Past:** The play explores how past traumas and unfulfilled dreams, especially Troy's missed baseball career, shape his present actions and influence his relationships with his family.
- **Legacy and Responsibility:** *Fences* examines the weight of responsibility and the legacy a parent leaves behind, both in terms of material provision and emotional impact.
- **Self-Deception and Pride:** The play also explores the theme of self-deception and the role of pride in Troy's character, which ultimately contributes to his downfall.

Mending Wall

- **Boundaries:** The poem's central focus is on the wall that divides two properties and the purpose of such a boundary, both in the literal and figurative sense.
 - **Nature vs. Structure:** Frost uses the natural forces that break down the wall as a symbol of nature's tendency to disrupt structures and challenge established norms.
 - **Tradition vs. Innovation:** The poem questions the traditional belief that “good fences make good neighbors,” suggesting that rigid boundaries can hinder genuine connection and understanding.
 - **Division and Isolation:** The wall serves as a metaphor for the divisions and isolation that can exist between people, even those who live nearby.
 - **The Nature of Relationships:** Mending Wall prompts reflection on the nature of relationships, suggesting that while boundaries can provide a sense of security, they can also create unnecessary barriers to genuine connection.
- In both the works, the writers have shown the different meanings of fence. Most of us have the same question, is it necessary to have a fence to maintain friendly relationships? Both the works *Fences* and *Mending Wall* presents the positive and negative structures.

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