

## Plays Questions and Responses

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### ***Fences***

#### Prompt:

Death an inevitable part of life, and yet it is a common fear amongst people. Mark Twain once stated that “The fear of death stems from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.”

Analyze this quote on the fear of death in relation to August Wilson’s play *Fences* and one other literary work of your choice. Think about the motif of death throughout the novel and whether or not the characters from the works selected, as well as any other prior knowledge, challenge, defend, or qualify the quote. Write a well-organized, well-thought essay to support your claim.

#### Response:

##### An Indefinite Vacation with Death

It’s natural to be afraid of death. The inevitable, dark, mysterious. Death is the absence of life, the opposite of what we know. In many ways, our fears are bounded by our boundaries of knowledge. To not know for sure means to fear.

In Arthur Koestler’s novel *Darkness at Noon*, the protagonist Rubashov begins to accept his general fate after he is imprisoned and has flashbacks allow him to realize the certainty of his demise. And in *Fences* by August Wilson, Troy realizes his fate after his encounter with Death and his certainty of his fate. Unlike what Mark Twain had proposed in his quote, both men had come to terms with Death; this was not because they were fearless in life — they most certainly had their worldly troubles — but because they were simply hyperaware of the reality of Death.

Troy tells the story that he wrestled with Death for three days, and that he was not willing to go down without a fight. While Rose more accurately portrays this as a three-day hospital stay due to pneumonia, Troy clearly is riled up by the encounter and willing to fight Death again for his life if necessary. He is not afraid, but simply accepting. When he does die he is pictured staring out into the open, presumably at an invisible Death character, swinging his bat as though he were ready to fight. Fight, without fear, for his life. Because he was already familiar with the experience.

This isn’t to say, however, that the experience with Death is “normalized” — rather, it is simply familiarized. Similar to how people are able to identify each other by voice or the creak of their footsteps, knowing the *presence* of Death gives people the lack of fear that Twain mentions. People learn from their experiences and a second encounter with Death would perhaps seem to be a better, more well-informed event to the person whom Death approaches.

Like a second interview, perhaps. Something daunting at first, but nothing that cannot be fixed with some practice.

Rubashov from *Darkness at Noon* has a similar attitude about Death. At first, he is utterly frightened of his own death, given nightmares that haunted him regularly until his arrest. But the arrest and the nightmares actually get him used to the idea that eventually he would have been caught, and eventually, he would be executed. Being in a prison with regular executions and visions of his

tumultuous, treasonous past only gives him more exposure to the very certainty, the knowledge of his proximity with Death, until he gives in and writes his manifesto— essentially a resignation to the state and to his death. When the bullets come in the end, he is ready to let it all go. In his final moments, there is no love for his family, no hate for his captors, no regret for his actions. All of that is below him then; he is simply ready to meet Death.

While it may seem that these two men, Troy and Rubashov, have come to terms with themselves by the end of their respective stories— and thus have “live[d] fully”— this is largely not the case. These men do not live full and content lives, but are instead riddled with extramarital affairs or plagued with constant hiding from arrest. Both men confront Death when they still have a family, have friends and friends around them. No, at their deaths these men may have nothing at peace with anyone in the world, including themselves, except for Death itself. Not necessarily ready to leave the world behind, but not afraid to.

Just ready to sign a contract or wrestle with Death.

It’s not only in these two works that the certain agreement with Death features prominently. In *Romeo and Juliet*, in 1984 (with the metaphorical death of suppression at its conclusion, in *A Farewell to Arms*, the deaths involved all had some sort of presentiment. As with Troy and Rubashov, there is some kind of understanding reached with Death beforehand, whether it be by family feuds (in *Romeo and Juliet*) or government oppression (in 1984) or a world war (in *A Farewell to Arms*). And, as in any true-to-life story, except in the most wretched of cases, there is always some loved ones left behind, something sacrificed in the material and emotional world that never really gives the deceased full closure, but do not prevent them from graciously accepting the deaths that come.

A fear of life has little or nothing to do with a fear of death. Phobia of death arises from being too distanced from it, acting aloof and invincible in a vulnerable, mortal casing. It’s all about truth and grounding— to come to friendly terms with Death means to get to know him better. If a man can truly familiarize himself with Death, then passing away will simply be an indefinite vacation with an old friend, leaving everything behind with nothing to fear.

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## ***Death of a Salesman***

Prompt:

Decision-making should always include some degree of retrospection to make well-informed decisions.

However, sometimes memories can cloud one’s thinking. The balance between relying on memories and instinct shows in every decision made.

Consider the quote by David Brazzeal in his book, *Pray Like a Gourmet*: “The challenge is to draw on the past but not be bound by it.”

In light of Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* as well as one other literary piece, to what extent does Brazzeal’s philosophy play in people’s lives currently, and to what extent should it apply? How do the actions of the characters defend or challenge this claim? Think about how the motifs of past and present and conflict from the literary pieces relate to the quote and write a well-organized and well-considered essay to support your argument.

Response:

Decision-Making for the Present, Not the Past

One perspective of the 21st century that we covered in our World Geography class last year was that it will be a repeat of the 20th century—that the citizens of the world will not learn from their past mistakes and make them all over again. There's still war, poverty, and racism, no matter how many anti-war, anti-poverty, and pro-civil rights movements there were in the 1900s, after all. It's all about integrating the nation's past and learning from it, but also stepping over old grudges and learning to move on.

The extremes of this retrospectivism can be seen in Albert Camus's absurdist novel *The Stranger*—in which the protagonist Meursault seems to have no roots in his past—and Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*—in which the majority of the characters seemed to be heavily restrained by their old ways and prejudices. From these extremes it appears that lightly “draw[ing] on the past” is sound advice, but the emphasis should be on the other part of the statement: to avoid “be[ing] bound by it.” For human beings can invent from nothing but be easily hindered by harmful memories.

Dwelling on the past is the more dangerous extreme. In the Loman family of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy and Biff hold onto a heavy grudge against one another: Biff for knowing about Willy's secret affair and Willy for Biff's loss of initiative after the affair. Although the affair is never explicitly mentioned to the other characters, the fact that it remains a central part of Willy's flashbacks shows his inability to let go of the past. The unending conflict between the two boys is matched by Linda's devoted love for Willy, founded on her love of the family before the conflict arose. Despite her good intentions, the fact that her husband is not mentally stable anymore, what with his talking to himself and being lost in the past and constant fighting with Biff, necessitate action on her part to either fix or leave the relationship. She never suspects Willy of being with another woman and never tries to find out the source of the conflict between her husband and her son, which in turn leaves her the bystander to a troubled family. Instead, she stubbornly returns to her benign, caring mother's instinct—overly so. In this case, too much of a good thing, without change, can cause harm.

The other extreme is likewise unpleasant. Meursault from *The Stranger* totally lacks roots, all of his actions being based on the present, on temporal urges. He kills a man just because the sun made him uncomfortable at the moment, is indifferent to the trial that decides the outcome of his life, and feels most alive moments before his execution because he is such at odds with the world.

He is a man ungoverned by time or reason, driven instead by dumb, primitive urges. While this means that he can withstand his mother's death and his death penalty with relative comfort, his life seems to be a meaningless jumble—hardly a position that people should strive for.

It turns out that a happy medium is located in the appropriately named character Happy from *Death of a Salesman*. Being the brother of Biff and the son of Willy, he is able to stay peacefully ignorant of the conflict between Biff and his father to reconcile the two, neither staying ensnaring himself in the past—by aggravating the grudge or being too lenient towards Willy—or staying completely out of the past—by being excessively happy-go-lucky and ignoring the conflict whatsoever. This in-between gives Happy the ability to use a steady mind to judge the actions of the two and keep the peace between the two, sometimes making up white lies to lower the tension. The past is only there to ground him, to have him know his place in the conflict; but, further than that, Happy feels obliged to help out, to change things.

And, in most cases, change is exactly what is needed.

Nobody can judge the present exactly by what precedents have been set. Even though it may seem that somebody or some nation is repeating the mistakes of the past, it can be meaningful and non-redundant as long as the conflict is not born out of the irrational aftermath of the other (i.e., a grudge of some sort). World War II can be considered a redundancy of World War I, in which downtrodden Germany revived its imperialistic ways. While Germany in this case may seem bound to its past and wrongful, the Allies' changed response shows that WWII promised otherwise. The ability to forgive Germany—to avoid having Germany pay all the heavy fines it did after WWI and actually helping it rebuild—showed the ability of the victors to reflect on the past and change accordingly.

Of course, decisions are usually not made so metacognitively that a person would delineate in his or her head the actions of the past and what is to be learned and discarded from them. But if members of society followed Brazzeal's advice with a little more emphasis on the fact that the past should not tie anyone down—that people should only use the past for perspective and not as a guide—then conflict resolution would greatly improve. The world of today is very different from the world of yesterday, and past actions cannot rule future ones.