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**TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY****Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*: A Search for African American Identity****A thesis submitted to the Central Department of English in partial fulfillment of  
the requirement for the degree of Masters of Arts in English****by****Jagendra Sapkota****Central Department of English****June, 2008****Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*: A Search for African American Identity**

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**Approval Letter**

This thesis submitted at the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Mr. Jagendra Sapkota entitled "*Joe Turner's Come and Gone: A Search For African American Identity*" has been approved by the undersigned members of research committee.

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### Abstract

August Wilson, a prolific American playwright, centers most of his plays on African American experiences. His *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is an excellent work in the field of American drama that reveals the African American experience of 1910s. It appropriately treats the transitional phase in American history, that is, the Great Migration. It also clearly depicts the legacy of slavery. In this phase most of the blacks were deprived of their cultural practices. The forced slavery had destroyed their identity and the sense of self-worth. Blacks' tradition and culture were dominated and marginalized by the western tradition and culture. Wilson is in the view of acquiring spiritual as well as economic empowerment as essential factors for black Americans to recover their identity and sense of self-worth. If one has to reestablish his identity, he must come to terms with his collective past and cultural roots. The present study taking into account his *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* shows how Wilson succeeds in presenting blacks' efforts and struggles to reestablish their identity. It mainly shows how Herald Loomis, a representative black, acquires his sense of self-worth and identity. August Wilson, through Herald Loomis, argues that the clues of rediscovering their African American identity lie in the collective past and cultural roots. Blacks should set them free from all western cultural and theological domination and embrace their African cultural practices to regain their self.

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## I. Introduction

Beginning his literary career as a poet, August Wilson switched to drama in 1980s and emerged as a significant voice in American theatre. He is considered as a spokesperson for the black experience in America. Most of Wilson's plays depict Afro-American suffering, pain and frustration in white dominated society. His plays clearly demonstrate the tensions between blacks who want to hold onto their African heritage and those who want to break away from it. Wilson's writing is rooted to a large extent on music, especially the blues. His works helped him achieve various coveted prizes like Pulitzer Prize, New York Drama Critic's Circle Award for Best Plays and Tony Award. These plays are the part of planned play-cycle devoted to the experiences of African American in each decade of the Twentieth century. Wilson himself says:

I am taking each decade of the twentieth century and looking at one of the most important questions that blacks confronted in that decade and writing a play about it. Put them altogether and you have a history. But I don't know whether I will be Successful in my goal or not. (qtd. in Savron 109)

Wilson's dramatic project comprises of a cycle of plays that explore some of the historical choices that have confronted African Americans during the twentieth century. This cycle of plays are *Jitney*, *Fullerton Street*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, *Radio Golf* etc. Each of those plays produced to date has enabled Wilson to explore, often in a very subtle ways, the myriad and mutating forms of the legacy of slavery. Although Wilson's decade plays were not written in chronological order, the consistent and key

theme of each play is the sense of the disconnection suffered by blacks uprooted from their original homeland.

August Wilson was born in Pittsburg in 1945. He was a son of Daisy Wilson, an African American woman, and Fredrich August Wilson Kittel, a white German immigrant who left the family when Wilson was young. Wilson officially erased his connection to his real father when he adopted his mother's name in 1970s. He grew up in an integrated section of a primarily African American area in Pittsburg, where he later set several of his plays including the *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The parochial high school he attended also gave him a harsh dose of racism. When he turned in a well-written term paper on Napoleon, Wilson was accused of plagiarism by a teacher who would not believe a black child could do that well on his own. So frustrated by the rampant racism he experienced in several schools, he dropped out in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. At home, Wilson's family also had to endure racial discrimination.

After spending some time on the street, he took a series of jobs- gardener, porter, metal worker and a dishwasher in a coffee shop. His mother wanted him to become a lawyer, but when her son continued to work at odd jobs, she got fed up with what she considered his lack of direction and kicked him out of the house. He joined in the US Army, but somehow got himself discharged a year later. At the age of 20, he moved into a boarding house and began writing poetry. The symbolic starting point of Wilson's serious writing career came in 1965 when he bought a used typewriter, paying 20 dollars that his sister gave him for writing her a term paper on Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg. By the age of late teens, Wilson had dedicated himself to the task of becoming a writer. It is said that his professional breakthrough occurred in 1978 when he was invited to write plays for a black theatre in St. Paul Minnesota.

Wilson's encounter with a collection of books marked Negro in the local library provided him the opportunity to see and discover the works of Harlem Renaissance and other African American writers. After reading such writers as Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright etc, Wilson realized that blacks could be successful in artistic endeavors without compromising their traditional culture and cultural heritage. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, in 1969, he co-founded Black Horizons on the Hill, a community theatre which aimed at raising black consciousness in the area.

When Wilson began writing his plays, he had little experience with theatre, and no formal training. Unencumbered by the theatrical history, Wilson created his own rules for his plays– relying on what he called the “4 Bs: the Blues, Painter Romare Bearden, fellow playwright Amiri Baraka and author Jorge Luise Borges. “A self-educated Wilson” as Samuel G. Freedman says, “also admired that jazzy rhythm and street sensibility of Baraka’s poetry and plays” (40). Most of all, painter Bearden had the strong influence on him. Regarding Bearden, Wilson claims, “ When I saw his work, it was the first time that I had seen black life presented in all its richness and I say, I want to do that– I want my plays to be the equal of his canvases” (Schwartzman 8).

Wilson believes that African American must rediscover their own history if they are to come to the terms with their present. The relationship of race to its past is crucial. He contends:

Writing our history has been a very valuable tool, because if we are going to be pointed toward future, we must know our past. This is so basic and simple. [ ---] One of the things I am trying to say in my



writing is that we never really begin to make a contribution to the society except as Africans. (Qtd in Savron 295-96)

But Wilson insists that until recently African Americans relied almost exclusively on a white interpretation of their history. So he is determined to redress the omission and fill the void. He contends that black community is floundering because it has failed turn its history for strength and guidance:

Blacks in America need to re-examine their time spent here to see the choices that were made as a people. I'm not certain the right choices have always been made. That's part of my interest in history to say "Let's look at this again and see where we've come from and how we've gotten and where we are now". I think if you know that, it helps determine how to proceed in the future. (Powers 52)

Although the process of empowering African American community through history appears relatively straightforward, it is potentially problematic, since traditional historiography is the product of Eurocentric world view that valorizes white man. Because the cultural experiences of marginalized like African Americans have been interpreted by historians according to the values and ideals of a white culture, the recovery, and, indeed the revaluation of African American history demands an alternative method of inquiry, one that is distinctly African American.

Wilson wants his audience to share his own pride in what it means to be an African in America. He insists that his characters respond in a way true to their own identities and milieu and never try to suppress their own culture and natural inclination. Wilson devoted himself to helping black people know their roots in order to help them understand themselves; his plays demonstrate the blacks' struggle to gain this understanding. He asks African Americans to reject the predominant culture and

discover their uniqueness. His goal moves towards empowering African Americans to acknowledge and celebrate their Africanness as Robert Brustein claims, “Wilson has thus far limited himself to the black experience in a relatively literalistic style” (29).

He uses African American folk belief or secular mythology. His approach is an innovative use of African American spirituality and folklore that gives its practitioners as private source of internal strength. James R Keller in his *African American Review* examines Wilson’s portrayal of African American folklore and secular mythology. He opines, “Wilson’s allusion to folklore such as shamanic rituals signifies the cultural reconstitution” (81). For Wilson self-empowerment is essential factor for black America to rediscover its sense of identity and self worth.

Thus, August Wilson’s mission in writing those cycles of plays is to rewrite the history to tell the experiences and stories of the silenced, misrepresented and forgotten masses. His plays deal with a common African American people and are created with elements of ritual, mysticism and story telling which are often found in African culture. He concentrates on bringing the past into the present as a healing measure for all Americans. By using historical frame, August Wilson gives us something of the past and something of the present. So Wilson’s legacy is a lovingly written history of the African American experience. He wants to break the hierarchy existing between white and black people in America. Most of his plays suggest black people should recreate their identity in the white dominated society.

August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, first produced in 1986 by the Yale Repertory Theatre was published in 1984. It is the third play in Wilson’s ten-play historical cycle, in which the playwright is chronicling the African American experience in the twentieth century by devoting a play to each decade. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* represents the 1910s. The play was inspired both by the 1978 Romare

Bearden artwork, *Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket*, and the blues song "Joe Turner's Come and Gone". The song, which was recorded by legendary blues artist, W. C. Handy, was first sung by many estranged black women who had lost their husbands, fathers and sons to Joe Turner— a plantation owner who illegally enslaved blacks in the early twentieth century. The play provided Wilson the prestigious New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Plays. The play which is generally regarded more mystical than Wilson's other plays, centers upon the struggles of migrants in the post Civil War North. Set in a Pittsburg boardinghouse in 1911 owned by Seth and Bertha Holly, the play examines African Americans' search for their cultural identity following the repression of American slavery. The play explores the struggles freed slaves faced as they moved northward to find work, new lives and new identities. Written in 1984, the play examines issues basic to African American culture, including the scars of slavery and the struggles experienced by successive generations in creating new lives while also trying to discover African heritage. Following the seven years of illegal bondage Herald Loomis, a black freedman travels to North in search of his wife who fled during his enslavement. The critical issue of white oppression is symbolized in Herald's haunted memory of Joe Turner, the notorious Tennessee plantation owner that illegally enslaved African Americans including Herald to work for him. As Herald says:

Everywhere I go people wanna bind me up. Martha wanna bind me up.  
 Those folks wanna bind me up. Zonia, my little daughter wanna bind  
 me up. You wanna bind me up. Joe Turner wanna bind me up!  
 Everyone wanna bind me up. Well, Joe Turner's Come and Gone. And  
 Herald Loomis ain't for no binding. (286)

Herald Loomis's journey ends at the Holly boardinghouse, where the black residents are also searching for some kind of connection and wholeness in their past. Though Herald Loomis believes he is searching for his lost wife Martha, the African conjurer, Bynum, lets him know that Herald is searching for his lost identity as Bynum says to Herald Loomis, "Herald, my friend you searching Martha, your wife I know but I sensing that you really gonna know who you are and where you from" (210). Herald Loomis has forgotten his song— his true identity as a result of his seven years enslavement by Joe Turner. Unknowingly he is wandering for his song as Bynum tells him:

Now he's got you bound up to where you can't sing your own song  
 couldn't sing it them seven years 'cause you was afraid he would  
 snatch it from you. See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song he  
 goes off in search of it till he find out he's got it with him all the time.  
 (268)

So, Herald Loomis is determined to rediscover his song, his Africanness which he nearly lost during the enslavement. Finally, he finds his song. This discovery of his song is symbolic in the sense, it is the discovery of his identity in particular and it is also the discovery of African cultural heritage in general.

The play is set in 1911 during the great migration when hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the rural South to settle in Northern industrial centers.

Regarding this, Sandra L Richards claims:

The play dramatizes the various wanderings of a group African Americans in search of place where they can feel at home in the world that is in search of an economic, social and cultural environment that will enable their agency. Taking temporary refugee in a Pittsburgh

boardinghouse, they share fragmented memories of family members before seemingly being propelled by desires for adventure, love or single minded purpose to journey further. (01)

The play focuses on the theme of African Americans moving from the agricultural South to a new set of hardships in the industrial cities of the North in early twentieth century.

Wilson then raises fundamental question about the nature of the black experience in America, probing the fascinating blend of two cultures that have informed the sensibilities of black Americans, their African heritage and Christian tradition into which they were thrust. Amanda M Rudolf posits:

Wilson sets up a dichotomy between the role of Christianity and the African traditional religion. Acceptance of one religion resolves the conflict, and Wilson illustrates these two polarized religions by creating the images that reflects the tenets of African traditional religion and Christianity. (38)

In this play, characters are struggling with and wrestling over their ideas of religion and God.

The play also dramatizes how poor blacks are exploited by the white industrialists as mere commodities. To escape from the scars of slavery of south an also lured by the industrial development those blacks travel to north with the hope of finding better jobs and better opportunities. But they are not safe there as well. Instead, they are treated as mere commodities as Rutherford Selig, only white character who appears on the stage, tells Loomis:

We been finders in my family for a long time. Bringers and finders.  
My great-granddaddy used to bring Nigras across the ocean on ships.

My daddy, rest his soul, used to find runaway slaves for the plantation bosses. Me and my daddy have found plenty of Nigars. I started finding Nigars for Nigars. I find you Nigars and charge money for my service. (239-40)

Selig finds African Americans and brings them to economic system demanding payment for his service. Regarding this, James R. Keller comments:

The play itself dramatizes the effort to introduce African Americans into the American industrial economy of the twentieth century, and Selig's role in the drama suggests that the most enduring link between the characters is the acquisition of material goods. His great grand father transported slaves from Africa; his father captured runaway slaves for their owners; and Selig himself locates displaced people for a fee. This practice reduces African Americans to commodities. He attains his ecstasy through consumer capitalism, through the "selling" of material products. (2)

For Selig, African Americans are objects for exploitation and exchange in the new economy, as in the old. His efforts are thus another manifestation of Joe Turner chain gang.

Thus, the play is not about slavery. It is about the consequences of slavery. It is also about separation. Separation from roots, separation from near and dear ones, and separation within own self. A man searching for wholeness, a man digging for the roots of his existence, a man reaching into his past to move into his future is the central idea of the play. Though on its surface a familiar tale about new arrival in the big city searching for jobs, lost relatives, adventure and love, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is most of all about a search for identity into a distant past. So this research

paper tries to examine how black people are able to rediscover the cultural roots and collective black identity. It mainly discusses the issue of identity, dislocation and slavery under the theoretical modality of cultural studies.

## **II. Cultural Studies: A Theoretical Modality**

Cultural studies is relatively new interdisciplinary academic discipline.

Cultural studies raises the questions of representation, that is, on how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us. It is multi-standard intellectual movement that places cultural analysis in the context of social formation, seeing society and culture as the product of historical process, emphasizing the inextricable relations between culture and power, and calling attention to social inequalities. In cultural studies, the term culture refers to popular culture such as film, popular fiction, best selling romances etc, as well as to that culture we associate with the so called classics. So, cultural studies aims to break down the boundary between so called high literature and low literature, and dismantles the hierarchy that the distinction implies.

Cultural studies is more descriptive and less evaluative, more interested in relating than rating cultural products and events. It aims to highlight the works of minority and ethnic groups, women and post-colonial writers which are marginalized by white male. So, cultural studies is broad term under which we study the issues of race, gender, minorities etc. The word culture in English is derived from the Latin word *cultura* which refers to the act of cultivation of soil. Later, it is applied to art, literature, and social institutions which are cultivated in the society.

Various scholars have defined cultural studies from different perspectives. For Raymond Williams, a British cultural critic, culture is “a whole way of life of a social group or whole society [...] that it is a signifying system through which necessarily a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (55). According to Williams, culture is not a fixed and finished but a living and changing thing. One of the changes he called for was the development of socialist culture. Like Marxists, with whom he often argues and sympathizes, Williams views culture in relation to



ideologies. Actually Williams' tendency is to focus on people as people, on how they experience conditions they find themselves in and creatively respond to those conditions in their social practices.

In an article on “The Need for Cultural Studies”, four contemporary cultural critics have viewed cultural studies as:

Cultural studies should abandon the goal of giving students access to that which represents a culture. Instead, it should show works in reference to other works, economic contexts, or broad social discourses [...] within whose context the work makes sense. Perhaps most important, critics doing cultural studies should counter the prevalent notion that culture is some wholeness that has already been formed. Culture, rather, is really a set of interactive cultures, alive and growing and changing, and cultural critics should be present and future oriented. (Giroux 478-79)

Those critics want to get us away from thinking about certain works as the best ones produced by a given culture. Culture is not the some wholeness which has already been formed; rather it is growing, changing and alive. There is no high culture or low culture. Actually they tend to combat the canon by critiquing the very idea of canon.

Stuart Hall who co-founded Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University with Richard Hoggart, views cultural studies as “a cluster of ideas, images and practices which provide ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society” (qtd. in Barker 6). Stuart Hall, along with Richard Hoggart and Richard Johnson plays a major part in the institutionalization of cultural studies. The center which was founded in 1964 is based on a critique of elitist definition of culture.

Postcolonial critics often deal cultural criticism in association with power, discourse and representation. They aim to examine its subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power. For Homi K. Bhabha, a renowned postcolonial critic, culture is a strategy of survival. Defining the idea of culture, he says:

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement [...] make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, a rather complex issue. (438)

Culture is both transnational and translational. The translational dimension of cultural transformation: migration, displacement, and relocation make the process of cultural transformation a complex form of signification. It is from the hybrid location of cultural value, the transnational as the translational, that postcolonial intellectuals attempt to elaborate a historical and literary project. They represent the incommensurability of cultural values and priorities. Postcolonial perspective insists that cultural and political identities are constructed.

Cultural studies is not a unified theory but a diverse field of study encompassing many different approaches, methods and perspectives. It is not a tightly coherent movement with a fixed agenda but a loosely connected group of tendencies, issues and questions. So the term may be used broadly to refer to all aspects of the study of culture and as such it may be taken to encompass the diverse ways in which culture is understood and analyzed. Kenneth Womack views the diversities of cultural studies as:

Cultural studies manifests itself in a wide array of interpretative dimensions, including such intersecting fields of inquiry as gender studies, post colonial, race and ethnic studies the politics of nationalism, popular culture, post modernism and historical criticism among variety of other topics. (243)

Cultural studies is composed of gender studies, race and ethnic studies, post colonial studies, Marxism, feminism and new historicism. It often concentrates on how particular phenomenon relates to matters of ideology, ethnicity, gender, nationality and social class.

There are some critics who are considered as the precursors of present day cultural studies. Those critics are Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser and other Marxists critics. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian critic, critiqued the very concept of literature and beyond that of culture, stressing not only the importance of culture more broadly defined but the need for nurturing and developing working class culture. Regarding Gramsci's influence on cultural studies, Scott Lash writes:

What Gramsci gave to this was the importance of consent and culture. If the fundamental Marxists saw power in terms of class versus class, then Gramsci gave to us a question of class alliance. The rise of cultural studies itself was based on the decline of the prominence of fundamental class-versus-class politics. (1)

Antonio Gramsci updated classical Marxism in seeing culture as a key instrument of political and social control. Similarly, he related literature to the ideologies of the culture that produced it and developed the concept of hegemony, a term Gramsci used to describe the pervasive, web-like system of meanings and values-ideologies-that

shapes the way things look, what they mean and, therefore, what reality is for the majority of people within a culture. The theory of hegemony is of central importance to the cultural studies. Thus, the key rubric for Gramsci and cultural critics is that of cultural hegemony.

Michel Foucault is another strong influence on cultural studies. He sought to study culture in terms of power relationship. Unlike Marxists, he refused to see power as something exercised by a dominant over a subservient class. Foucault tried to view all things in terms of widest possible variety of discourses. Thus, Foucault tended not only to build interdisciplinary bridges but also, in the process, to bring into the study of culture the “histories of women, homosexuals, and minorities” (qtd. in Hunt 45)– groups seldom studied by those interested in so called high culture.

Cultural studies is an academic discipline which combines literature, art, political economy, film or video studies, social theory etc to study cultural phenomena in various societies. It is multidisciplinary field of inquiry which blurs the boundaries between it and other subjects. Cultural studies concerns itself with the meaning and practices of everyday life. The dominant notion of culture is itself a cultural construct. The ways that we understand our collective system of meaning, our collective ways of valuing and understanding the world are cultural constructs. Culture is always created in a social and political context.

The exponents of cultural studies sought to situate cultural product explicitly in relation to other social practices and particularly in relation to political structure and social hierarchies such as race, class and gender. The totality of culture as a frame of reference shapes and controls man’s view of the world around him or her. Thus, the concept of culture is associated with identity. The issues of identity, race, and gender are the main concern of cultural studies. August Wilson, in his play *Joe Turner’s*

*Come and Gone*, mainly raises the issue of identity, culture, race etc. Because of the white domination, African American are marginalized and victimized in America. So Wilson wants to subvert the hierarchy existing between white and black people. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson dramatizes African American's search for their cultural identity.

### **Identity**

Identity is an issue that emphasizes the identity of a subject as a representative of one or another group. Identity involves intense desire for establishing existence and space by replacing fixed, coherent and stable assumptions through doubt and uncertainty. Fueled by political struggles as well by philosophical and linguistic concerns, identity emerged as the central issue of cultural studies in the 1990s. It is the topical issue in the contemporary study of culture with many ramifications for the study of race, gender, class, sexuality and subcultures. So, the politics of feminism, of ethnicity and sexual orientation, among others, have been high prolific concerns intimately connected to the politics of identity.

Identity is questioned when something considered to be fixed is displaced by the experience of uncertainty. Koben Mercer presents similar view on identity and says, "Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis; when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (qtd. in Hall 275). The notion of identity is elusive and often becomes a subject of doubt unless it is in crisis. Crisis of identity results from the lack of location to a specific culture, society or nation. Globalization has increased the migration rate and has altered the relations between western and other cultures by taking away the sense of identity of individuals across the nation.

Identity is constructed by diversity of discourses, among which there is no necessary relation but a constant movement of determination and displacement. Identity is a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted by representation. Identities are wholly social constructions and cannot exist outside of cultural representations. Chantal Mouffe views identity as:

The identity of such multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent and precarious temporarily fixed at the intersection of those subject positions and dependent on specific forms of identification. The plurality, however, does not involve the “coexistence”, one by one, of a plurality of a subject positions but the constant subversion and over determination of one by the others, which makes possible the generation of “totalizing effects” within a field characterized by open and determinate frontiers.(152 -53)

Identity for Mouffe is contradictory and multiple subjects. He placed identity in a set of fixed and non fixed as well. Identity of a subject is not fixed or finished, rather changing and unfixed. It is determined and constructed by the social and cultural context. Identity creates space and subject positions which can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences.

Perceived within the domain of cultural studies, identity is not concrete thing which exists there; has no essential or universal quality. Rather, it is discursive construction, the product of discourse or regulated ways of speaking about the world. In other words, identity is constituted by representations. The meanings of different aspects are changing but never finished or complete. According to Hall:

Persons are composed not of one but of several, sometimes contradictory identities. The subject assumes different identities at

different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent self. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continually being shifted about if we feel that we have unified identity from to death, it is only because we construct a confronting story or “narrative of the self” about ourselves. (The Question, 277)

Identities are social constructions and can not exist outside of representations.

Identities are constructed through narrative, myth, memory and fantasy. Identities, thus, are the points of identifications, the unstable points of identifications, which are made within the discourse of culture and history. But essentialists assume that identity exists as a universal and timeless core of the self which all possess, i. e. descriptions of ourselves reflect an essential underlying identity. To put simply, the essentialist view would be that the identity common to members of a social group is stable and more or less unchanging; since it is based on the experience they share.

But Cornel West defines identity from slightly different perspective. For him identity is the matter of desire and death. He defines:

Identity is fundamentally about desire and death. Here you construct your identity is predicted on how you conceive of death; desire for recognition; quest for visibility; the sense of what Edward Said would call affiliation; the sense of being acknowledged; a deep desire for association [...]. And then there is a profound desire for protection, for security, for safety, for surety. (15-16)

Here, West means to say that while talking about identity, we have to look at the various ways in which human beings have constructed their desire for protection,

recognition, affiliation, association over time and space, sometimes under circumstances not for their own choosing. There is also desire for safety and security.

People express their identities as a matter of everyday cultural practice. Hence it is more rigorously in the situation when the identity itself is in question. People often disregard the notion of identity when it is not questioned i.e. their cultures provide them stable identity. Identity is the matter of concern especially for minority and ethnic group such as blacks, Native Americans, women who are marginalized and victimized by white male. Identity for a racial group is a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group. So, if they are unable to practice their common racial and cultural heritage due to different circumstances, they feel that their identity is in crisis.

Blacks, to be precise, are marginalized and victimized by the white dominated society in America. Their racial and cultural heritages are consistently subdued and marginalized. James W Tuttleton in *The Black American Writer* points out the marginalized existence of blacks as:

The vision of Negro American life implied in this dismissal of psychological, theological, and existential questions shuddering to contemplate. It reduces the Negro to the merely victim of white brutality. It conceives of all Negroes as mindless, inarticulate, totally determined, sub-human creatures incapable of experiencing creative freedom, intellectual curiosity, or liberating self consciousness. (255)

He brilliantly projects the existential questions about their identity, white brutality and oppression, which came as shattering blow to their identity and humanity as a whole. He clearly depicts white mentality on black's identity as mindless subhuman creature with no creativity and intellectuality.



Most of the African American writers and scholars focus their writings on establishing stable identity. August Wilson is one of them. Considered as a spokesperson for the black experience in America, Wilson's concern is mainly centered on the very issue of identity. Most of his works dramatize the African American's search for their identity. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* also, Wilson explores African American's search for identity following the repression of American slavery. The play depicts the struggles of freed slaves to find work, new lives, and above all, new identities. In the play, Herald Loomis believes that he is searching for his lost wife Martha, but Bynum lets him know that Herald is really searching for his lost identity which he has lost during the seven years of illegal enslavement to Joe Turner.

Anyway, the issue of identity is central to cultural studies, in so far as cultural studies examines the context within which both individuals and groups construct, negotiate and defend their identity or self understanding.

### **Dislocation**

Dislocation results from willing or unwilling movement from one place to another. It is the outcome of movement from one country to another. People feel dislocated whenever they are far from their origin, whenever they are far from their root, whenever they are deprived of their racial and cultural heritage. The feeling of dislocation becomes an issue when people are unable to practice their culture due to different circumstances like domination and marginalization by dominant race. Ernest Lac Lau defines dislocation as never ending process. He says, "A dislocation structure is one whose center is displaced by another" (qtd. in Hall 278). The phenomenon of dislocation is the result of migration from one country to another by slavery, invasion or settlement.

The term dislocation is basically associated with imperial and colonial occupation. It is defined in *Key Concepts in Post Colonial Studies* as:

A term for both the occasion of displacement that occurs as a result of imperial occupation and the experiences associated with this event [...]. The term is used to describe the experience of those who have willingly moved from the imperial 'Home' to the colonial margin, but it affects all those who, as a result to colonialism have been placed in a location that because of colonial "hegemonic" practices, needs, to be reinvented in language, in narrative, and in myth. (Ashcroft 73)

The colonial settlers, once they arrived in an alien land, they felt the necessity of establishing new identity since they were displaced from their own point of origin. Diaspora communities formed by forced or voluntary migration may all be affected by this process of dislocation. Dislocation is also feature of all invaded colonies where people of colonized countries feel that they are real victim of dislocation from their own culture because of colonial domination. At best, they are placed into a hierarchy. This hierarchy ignores its institutions and values in favour of the values and practices of the colonizing culture. Thus they experience the sense of dislocation and alienation even in their own native land.

Dislocation is particularly associated with the marginalized racial groups like blacks. The concept of race emerged in the eighteenth century to help Europeans understand all of the ostensibly different people that they were encountering throughout the world. As this exploration became conquest, the notion of race became a way to justify domination. A hierarchy developed whereby the people called blacks were considered at the lowest scale of human development. Even after the abolition of slavery in America, the notion did not change significantly. Du Bois, an outstanding

Afro-American historian pointed out the dislocated position blacks by placing them at the bottom of social order. In his well-known book *The Souls of Black Folk*, Bois says:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with veil, and gifted with second - sight in this American world,- a world which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eye of others. One ever feels his two ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warning ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (6-7)

Blacks have their fragmented selves because they are viewed through other's eyes. They are unable to tear apart the veil of restrictions of the white dominated society. An African American has two souls, two identifications, two thoughts. He has strong desire not to lose his older self and to create better self. This double vision and double consciousness, thus, is a product of the historical dialectic in American society between black and white cultures.

So, blacks especially are living in dislocation. The dislocation occurs at physical as well as psychological level. Their African heritage is consistently repudiated by white society. Therefore the sense of isolation has racially dislocated them. Despite the class differences among whites, there was racial unity in which even the poorest whites would feel themselves a step above the lowest rung on the hierarchy. Thus, the social, political, economic and racial oppression over the black people degraded and reduced them to the deplorable condition of dislocation,

illiteracy and poverty. African Americans need to undertake a more thorough cultural reconstruction to cope with the severity of dislocation that they have experienced.

August Wilson consciously presents this very condition of dislocation in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. He explores how African American people are experiencing dislocation from their roots, their traditions and their culture. He also describes their attempt to cope with this condition in the play.

### **Slavery**

Slavery is a social economic system under which certain persons are treated as items of property, deprived of personal freedom and compelled to work. Slaves are held against their will from the time of their capture, purchase or birth, and are deprived of the right to leave, to refuse to work, or to receive compensation in return for their labour. The most common types of slave works are domestic service, agriculture, industry and commerce. Paul Finkelman defines slavery as "The status and/or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised" (1). Slaves can not leave an owner, an employer or a territory without explicit permission, and they will be returned if they escape.

The evidence of slavery predates written records. It can be found in almost all cultures and continents. Slavery has existed, in one form or another, through the whole of recorded human history. It existed in Greek and Roman civilization; and in modern times, the southern USA, the Caribbean, and some parts of Asia and Africa. Historically, most slaves were captured in wars or kidnapped in isolated raids, but some persons were sold into slavery by their parents, or by themselves, as a means of surviving extreme conditions. Most slaves were born into that status, to parents who were enslaved. Ancient warfare often resulted in slavery for prisoners and their families, who were either killed or sold as slaves. Captives were often considered the

property of those who captured them and were looked upon as a prize of war. Those captured sometimes differed in ethnicity, nationality, religion or race from their enslavers.

Ancient societies characterized by poverty, rampant warfare or lawlessness, famines and population pressures are frequently exporters of slaves to more developed nations. Even after the abolition, there were traces of illegal slavery in the world. The illegal slave trade deals with slaves who are rural people forced to move to cities, or those purchased in rural areas and sold into slavery in cities. As Paul Finkelman argues:

Although there is no longer any state which legally recognizes, or which will enforce, a claim by a person to a right of property over another, the abolition of slavery does not mean that it ceased to exist. There are millions of people throughout the world - in conditions of virtual slavery, as well as in various forms of servitude which are in many respects similar to slavery. (4)

Though the system of slavery was abolished long before, it was still in practice in different forms through the world.

Slaves were exported in western countries, especially in America, from various African and Caribbean countries. Those slaves had almost no rights or freedom, and are not paid for their labour except from food, clothing and shelter. They were considered as the property of the whites. This system of social exploitation and inequalities resulted in Civil War in America. The ill effects of this system was the matter of concern for August Wilson and he raises the strong voice against it in the play. He shows illegal slavery has affected the life of many African Americans. Cultural studies focuses on social practices and social hierarchies. It tries to subvert

the social inequalities and discriminatory social practices. Since slavery is a means to exploit and dominate the blacks, it can also be the matter of concern for cultural studies to highlight the negative consequences of slavery.

### **III. Search for African American Identity: A Textual Analysis**

August Wilson sets this play in a boardinghouse, a temporary shelter for people on their way to something else, and all the characters that come by are searching for something or someone. Herald is looking for his wife, Martha, after spending seven years of enforced labour on a chain gang in Tennessee. Bynum is searching for the mysterious shiny man whereas Mattie, Jeremy and Molly are searching for their lost companion. Most of them have been separated from a loved one and have traveled long journey to fill their emptiness. The apparent endlessness of each quest appears to be connected to the nature of separation that launched the search. In every case, it occurred under circumstances over which the searchers have no control. They do not know where the person they are searching for might possibly be. Though it seems they are searching for their lost companions, but if we analyze it in depth they are really searching for their lost identity which lies in their collective past.

The search for identity is focused chiefly on the hero, Herald Loomis, a thirty two year old deacon struggling to emerge from white oppression of Joe Turner. After spending seven years on Joe Turner's chain gang and being told repeatedly he is worthless, Herald searches for the world that speaks something about himself. Says Wilson about Herald:

He is at time possessed. A man driven not by the Hellhounds that seemingly bay at his heels, but by his search for a world that speaks to something about himself. He is unable to harmonize the forces that swirl around him and seeks to recreate the world into one that contains his image. (216)

Having returned from the depth of hell, he is alienated from himself and the world. He carries within him a deep sorrow that clings to him like a great coat, casting its gloom over the inn, which soon begins to quiver under his tormented gaze. Herald believes that he is only searching for his wife, but Bynum lets him know that he is really wandering to regain his lost identity.

Herald and Martha are sharecroppers, until he is abducted by Joe Turner. When Herald is released, he recounts how he tried to return to his life. As Herald says, "I made it back to Henry Thompson's place where me and Martha was sharecropping and Martha gone. She taken my little girl and left her with her mama and took off North" (216). When Herald decides to take his daughter Zonia and go up to North to find Martha, he joins many other African Americans who were also hitting the road, for a variety of reasons. With his daughter, he has been out there walking up and down the roads, in search of his wife, but he also sought himself.

Herald is the primary protagonist on this journey towards self-cognition. Being separated from his wife and daughter when Joe Turner captured him and kept him on the chain gang for seven years, he says on more than one occasion that he wants to find his wife so that he can have a "starting place in the world" (269). Joe Turner had separated Herald not only from his family in which he knew himself but in a more fundamental way, from his sense of self-worth and identity. Seemingly, through Martha, Herald wants to establish a point of origin for a future narrative that he will enact; thus, the search for Martha becomes a search to make the sense of his past. Herald's experience reflects in miniature the experience of Africans in America: brutally and abruptly torn from their families, these Africans have had to come to terms with why they were dehumanized and how they are to erect a new, enabling narrative.



### Searching Identity in Collective Past

In his search for his wife, and more significantly, for his past and himself, Herald enlists the services of a white traveling salesman named Selig, who, besides selling pots and pans, hires himself as people finder to blacks looking for lost loved ones for a dollar fee, Selig writes down the name and description of the missing person and watches for that person as he travels around the country selling his wares. By performing this service for African Americans in search of one another, Selig follows a tradition he has inherited from his father and grandfather. As he tells Herald, “[w]e been finders in my family for a long time. Bringers and finders. [---] we started finding Nigras for Nigras” (239-40). In order to be found by Selig, a black man or woman must first buy something from him. The economic system represented by Selig, a system which exploits and excludes blacks is one that they can be found in only as Nigras. And to be found in this way is to experience the same alienation from self and community that created the need for Selig’s services in the first place. As Bertha Holly informs Herald after he has hired Selig to find his wife:

You can call him a people finder if you want to. I know Rutherford Selig carries people away too. He done a whole bunch of them away from here. Folks plan on leaving plan by Selig’s timing. Than he charges a dollar to tell them where he took them. Now that’s the truth of Rutherford Selig. He never found nobody he ain’t took away.

Loomis, you just wasted your dollar. (241)

Selig represents economic forces which not only exploit African Americans but also deny their intrinsic worth as persons. Though he appears to be working in the service of myriad groups of blacks searching for family and friends, his charging of one

dollar serves for different motives—to exploit them economically. Thus, Herald's search for his wife and his past with the help of Selig seems to be doomed to failure.

Bynum can act as people finder, however, only to people who carry within themselves a sense of their own humanity. He can act as a spiritual guide only to anybody who already searches for himself. As a man cut off from self and community, seeking himself through the recovery of the past, Herald Loomis is that anybody, as Seth unconsciously reveals when he voices suspicions about Herald's identity. "Anybody can tell anybody anything about their name is. That's what you call him Herald Loomis. His name liable to be anything" (227). So Bynum is the right person to help and guide Herald find his self. Since Herald is the anybody who could be the shiny man, his search and Bynum's are the same. Herald is searching for himself through recovery of the past, and Bynum is searching for the man whom he can guide to himself and whose self-recovery will validate the efficacy of Bynum's own song. The search for the self and the search for the shiny man is a collective project, for the self that is its object can be found only in the past.

Bynum's search for the shiny man is interesting one. Bynum tells that he met a strange man during his younger age while walking on the road who offered him to show the secret of life. Then the strange man was able to serve as guide on this unfamiliar road because he had "a voice inside him telling him which way to go" (212). Bynum narrates his encounter with the strange man as:

We get near this bend in the road and he told me to hold out my hands. Then he rubbed them together with his hand and I looked down and see they got blood on them. My hands were full of blood. He told me to take and rub all over me and say that was a way of cleaning myself. (212)

After cleansing Bynum's hands with blood, the stranger led him to a place where "everything was bigger than life" (212) and there left him, disappearing in a light streaming from his body. This act inspires Bynum to have vision, in which life is magnified and the strange man starts signing. After the shiny man left, the spirit of Bynum's father appeared as a guide and taught him how to find his self. Bynum's father had told him that if he saw another shiny man before his death, "I would know that my song had been accepted and worked its full power in the world and I could lay down die a happy man" (212). After that, Bynum has been searching for the shiny man. When Herald finds his song—his self, at the end of the play, he also begins to shine. Herald becomes the next shiny man. So, Bynum's search for the shiny man is over. The shiny man represents any independent man who has embraced his cultural heritage and forged a new, self-sufficient identity.

Searching for the self in the past presupposes that the past is one which can ground a self that it was made by other selves whose agency can function as the precedent for and promise of one's own. Initially, Herald is unable to see the collective African American past in this way. But a significant event which occurs in the boardinghouse inspires Herald see the collective past. In one evening, all the boardinghouse tenants except Herald perform juba— an African-style song and dance mentioning the name of Holy Ghost. When they mention the name of Holy Ghost, Herald enters in a rage, and tells them that the Holy Ghost is going to burn them up and attempts to mock their ritual dance. Says Herald to others, "You singing for the Holy Ghost to come? What he gonna do, huh? He gonna come with the tongues of fire to burn up your wooly heads?" (251). As the Holy Ghost seizes hold of him, forcing him to talk in tongue, it is dispelled by a more powerful experience. Their mentioning of the Holy Ghost unknowingly inspires Herald to have a vision.

In the process, Herald has a vision and Bynum guides him through it. This vision emerges from the depth of his subconscious past i.e. the vision of the bones. Herald imagines that he is looking out on an ocean, where the bones rise from their watery graves, and sink down again. And, when they are finally washed ashore, Herald sees that they are black people like him. Then they separate from one another and take different paths. Herald talks with Bynum about his vision as:

Bynum: What you done seen Herald Loomis?

Loomis: I done seen bones rise up out of the water. Ride up and walk across the water. Bones walking on top of the water.

Bynum: Tell me about them bones, Herald Loomis. Tell me what you see.

Loomis: They got flesh on them! Just like you and me. They black just like you and me. Ain't no difference. (251-52)

These bones symbolize African slaves, Herald's ancestors who perished in the holds of slavery and whose bodies were tossed into the Atlantic Ocean, are an integral part of the whole black experience in America. Unwilling pioneers in a massive racial struggle for survival; they were the first victims of terrible odyssey. For centuries their memory was part of an important link between the old tradition and emerging African American identity.

To understand his true identity and his destiny, Herald must relieve the whole experience of his race. Having already endured slavery, he now returns to the moment when his people arrived at these shores, for his spirit must make journey from the beginning. The bones sink into the ocean from which they are then resurrected as bodies with flesh and resorted to life by a wind that fills them with breath or spirit. Standing up from the shore, a whole race of forgotten people wend their way across

the new land as Herald says, “They shaking hands and saying goodbye to each other and walking every whichaway down the road” (252). Herald knows he must reconnect with his African forebears, for they alone can free his African spirit. The path to spiritual and physical liberty lies in a reunion with the past, and once his spirit merges with the spirits of his ancestors, he will find his African self.

Meanwhile, Herald feels that his spirit merges with the spirits of his ancestors. He identifies himself with one of the ancestors. He becomes not simply like his ancestors but one of them:

Loomis: They ain't moved or nothing.

Bynum: You just laying there. What you waiting on, Herald Loomis?

Loomis: I'm laying there, waiting.

Bynum: What you waiting on, Herald Loomis?

Loomis: I'm waiting on the breath to get into my body. (252)

But, try, as he may, he can not rise to join his ancestors. The door to salvation lies open, but he does not yet have strength to walk through, to be united with the past, and to find his true self. The ordeal continues.

As Loomis, overcome by the apparition, lies on the floor as exhausted as the bodies of his ancestors on the seashore. Bynum helps him articulate the vision. He does so because he had a similar revelation when he met the spirit of his father. The two of them explore the text of the vision. Their sing-song call and response recalls the basic patterns of the blues. This, in turn, is reminiscent of African music. Thus, this journey of revelation through racial consciousness bears the unmistakable mark of an African spirituality. Now, Herald's African identity makes strong claim on him but not totally free of western cultural domination.

Finally he meets his wife Martha. Martha tries unsuccessfully to clean Herald's sins of disobeying Christianity by the sacrificial blood of the lamb. But this inspires Herald to slash his chest and use his own blood to wash himself clean, "I can bleed for myself" (287). It is an act that defies Martha's Christianity and affirms Herald's belief in himself. At that time, Herald realizes that he has rediscovered his true African self and says, "I'm standing. My legs stood up! I'm standing now!" (287). Bynum recognizes the blood cleansing as a reenactment of his shiny man's blood ritual. When Herald runs from the room, Bynum knows that his own search has also ended. He has found his shiny man. He sees Herald Loomis shining for whom he is searching. He says, "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like a new money!" (288).

Herald now realizes that it is impossible to be reunited with his wife permanently. He knows their lives have taken divergent routes and their lives are different now, that there is no compelling bond between them anymore. At that moment, he understands why he was searching for her. The search is not to be reunited, but to say goodbye to her and close the book on his earlier life. Says Herald:

I been working to look on your face to say my goodbye. That goodbye got so big at times, it was gonna swallow me up. Like Jonah in the whale's belly I sat in that goodbye for three years. That goodbye kept me out on the road searching. Not looking on women in their houses. It kept me bound up to the road. All the time that goodbye swelling up in my chest till I'm about to bust. Now that I can say my goodbye and make my own world. (289)

The goodbye is also reconciliation. After seven years, they know their separation was not of their own making. They were victims of circumstances. Aware that Herald and Martha are heading in different directions, Bynum binds Zonia to her mother.

Once he has returned his daughter to her mother and said goodbye to his wife, Herald Loomis enters the final stage of his quest i.e. self-empowerment in the full realization of his true cultural identity. This moment of realization is therefore, not an isolated event but the culmination of a subliminal process that gathered force from all the experiences of Herald's past. Herald has found his African American identity.

The story of Herald Loomis arguably suggests that African Americans, if they are to transcend their liminal existence, should recover their African sensibilities. Herald achieves his new social status as a free African American through self-knowledge. His experience demonstrates that the true destiny of black people begins in their African roots. Only when they embrace their African identity completely, they are really free. This journey is extremely painful, involving, on some level, reliving the agonies of the past. Herald's life encapsulates and parallels the entire black experience: stolen and enslaved, forced to work on a cotton plantation, freed, separated from family, reunited physically with his immediate past and spiritually with his distant past.

### **Blues: Symbol of Identity**

August Wilson, in most of his plays, uses blues as one of the most important means to describe African Americans' cultural richness. And, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is not an exception. Blues are not only the African Americans' symbol of identity but also the symbol of hope. Wilson sees blues as the most accurate articulation of African American experience and uses them as a paradigm in his plays. Blues are the historical records of a community that has been marginalized in the

white dominated society. Wilson himself claims that his project is “entirely based on the ideas and attributes that come out of the blues” (qtd in Shanon 4). For Wilson, blues are the African American community’s cultural response to the world; they are a music that breathes and touches. That connects. The blues is a connective force that links the past with the present, and present with the future.

The analysis of Wilson’s blues is much indebted to the vernacular theory proposed by African American literary scholar Houston A. Baker, Jr. in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*. Like Wilson, Baker provides a broad and open-ended definition of the blues, describing them as “an amalgam of work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament and much more” (5). The blues, rather than being a hybrid of European aesthetic forms, constitute an expressive matrix that reflects the complexities and richness of African American culture. So, Wilson uses the blues as a cultural trope that foregrounds the marginalization of African Americans in order to reawaken cultural consciousness. He views the blues as an empowering text that records African American experiences. For Wilson, the historical knowledge provided by the blues is the first step in transcending marginal existence. As an ever changing network of ceaseless input and output, the blues are in Baker’s words, “the multiplex, enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed” (4). Thus, their potential as a critical tool in examining African American literature, culture and life in general is far reaching.

By 1911, the time of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, the blues songs were just starting to become popular as a musical form. In its rhythms, blacks recognize not only the echoes of slave work songs but also the hopes and fears of slavery reaching back all the way to the music of Africa. In their darkest moment they found comfort



in the blues. It was always there whenever they needed it. “Music don’t know certain night” (203), says Bynum, referring to Seefus’s bar where the black folk congregate to make the music that unites them with a common bond and keeps them in touch with their deepest roots. It permitted spiritual and emotional release by codifying their experiences and was a testament to the fact that they are not a desperate bunch of wondering souls but descendents from and inheritors of a rich and fascinating tradition. Presumably lured by the promise of industry, millions of African Americans moved North at the turn-of-the-century in the hope of finding a better life. In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, also, Wilson describes the southern exodus into the northern cities. He describes:

Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the Gods and only guessing at their laces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their hearts kicking in chest with a song worth singing. They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars [---] to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and whelp of joy. (203)

The blues are the inherent part of their life. Though they are isolated from their near and dear ones, the blues songs help them feel comfort and joy.

Having been tied down so long by slavery and sharecropping, blacks in the play are desperate to fill the spiritual void and they are also desperate to reunite with relatives. The chain gang system affected the personal lives of many African Americans. In the play, Bynum sings a blues song which was first sung by a group of estranged African American women that reflects the effects of the chain gang system on their lives:

They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone  
Ohhh Lordy

They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone

Ohhh Lordy

Got my man and gone

Come with forty links of chain

Ohhh Lordy

Come with forty links of chain

Ohhh Lordy

Got my man and gone. (219)

Here, the blues lyrics reflects the pain and suffering of African American women whose husbands, sons and fathers were captured by the infamous Tennessee plantation owner to work for him. It echoes men and women looking for each other, and their longing to be united with each other. Those lyrics of the blues song tell about the loneliness created by separation and their desperate search for companionship.

The blues set them apart, for it was alien to the sensibilities of white people, as illustrated by Jeremy's story about a white man's inability to tell the differences between three blues musicians in a guitar playing competition. Jeremy says, "After we play a while, the white fellow called us to him and said he couldn't make up his mind' say all of us was the best guitar player" (234). Jeremy does his best to demonstrate his skill against his two opponents until he realizes that the white man is tone deaf and can not distinguish the quality of each man's music. The white judge, unable to declare a winner, divides a paltry prize of twenty five cents between the contestants with a "penny on the side" (234). The anecdote related by Jeremy serves as a reminder that white effort to understand the products of black culture can be attended by arrogance and insensitivity. The arrogance of the tone deaf white judge assumes

that economic and social privilege qualify him to judge a black culture, but Jeremy clearly disagrees with his insensitivity to the different voices within that culture.

Each song is unique, with its unique power that derives from the mix of each person's characteristics. Bynum has the binding song; his father had the healing song. Both are healers, however, the father made individuals whole, the son does the same for relationship. But for a man to bind the lives of other men, he must first be in tune with his own song. It is his father's ghost who urges Bynum to find his song. As Bynum says:

He told me he was gonna show me how to find my song. Then he showed me something that I ain't got words to tell you. But if you stand to witness it, you done seen something there. I stayed in that place awhile and my daddy taught me the meaning of this thing that I had seen and showed me how to find my song. (249)

By describing his encounter with his dead father Bynum says that his father's spirit appears; object becomes larger than life; and his traveling companion begins to glow. Bynum reveals that his father was a conjurer man whose song had the capacity to heal. In his effort to discover his own song, Bynum intentionally selects one that differs from his father's, but one that, nevertheless possesses a philanthropic objective. He will bind those who have been separated, and he is likely to be very busy, since every character in the play is searching for a lost lover or family member. Bynum, the conjurer man has received his song from the spirit of his father, a song that has magical quality– the capacity to bind people together.

Having found his song, Bynum's life's work is to help others find their songs. He chose the binding song to help other because "that's what (he saw) most, when (he) was traveling, people walking away and leaving one another" (252). He looked

around at a fractured race of wandering people and knew he had to spend his life healing the wounds caused by shattered relationship, bringing together these people dispersed by circumstances. He stipulates that he is not teaching new tunes, but helping others to rediscover the music that they have forgotten. He says, “I’m not gonna teach you guys the new music, but what I really gonna help you is to find your own song which you are obliged to forget” (257). In each case, Bynum suggests that it is the domination of white culture that has caused the African American characters to forget their songs.

Herald Loomis also must rediscover his song that is within him, if he wants to rediscover his identity. Like the caged bird Herald Loomis has forgotten his song during the enslavement to Joe Turner. But he must learn to sing his true song, he has to do what Bynum did; recognize and restructure all the fragments and characteristics from his life and racial memory. Bynum answers to Herald that Joe Turner did not capture him for seven years because he was worthless, rather it was envy to Herald’s song that let Joe Turner to imprison him. As Herald asks:

Herald Loomis: I ain’t never seen Joe Turner. Seen him to where I could touch him. I ask one of them fellows one time why he catch niggers? He told me I was worthless. Worthless is something you throw away. So I must got something he want. What I got? What I got, huh? (263)

Pragmatically, Seth replies that Joe Turner wanted Herald Loomis’s labour. But this answer is unsatisfying to Bynum as he says:

Every nigger he catch he is looking for the one he can learn that song from. Now he’s got you bound up to where you can’t sing your own song. Couldn’t sing it them seven years ’cause you was afraid he

would snatch from under you. What he wanted was your song. He wanted that song to be his. But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it. (264)

So, Joe Turner captured Herald to steal his song– that is to steal his true identity. But Herald did not lose his song even during that horrible experience of slavery; he only forgot how to sing it.

Bynum is determined to help and guide Herald Loomis to rediscover his song. He brings an intense commitment to his work, taking time and effort to study the particulars of each case. He encourages Herald every time to find his song because he knows that to find song means to find his identity. As Bynum tells Herald Loomis, “you binding yourself. You bound unto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it, Herald Loomis” (270). Bynum believes that Herald will also find a unique song “the song of self- sufficiency free from any encumbrances other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of his flesh” (270). Finding his song means starting a new life of freedom. Joe Turner owned him for seven years, crushed his spirits and tried to possess him. His perception of his real self is buried deep in his subconscious and trapped under the debris of tormented spirit. So it is very difficult for him to restore the strength and memory to find his song. But Bynum is still there to help Herald. He uses collective memory to confront Herald with his personal loss and with the way the loss affects him. Bynum’s suggestion is that the song of loss and victimization has displaced Herald’s own song. In order to “soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions” (272), he must discover his song that is within him. Herald’s song stands as a symbol of his identity. As Bynum clarifies:

Now I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forget his song. Forgot how to sing it. You forgot how to sing your song.[---] When a man forgets his song he goes in search of it till he find out he's got it with him all the time. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is. (273-74)

By telling so, Bynum does not only mean that Herald has literally forgotten how to sing a song that he used to know. Instead, the song is a symbol of Herald's identity, and African American identity in general.

He ultimately receives strength and vision from Juba dance, reminiscent of the dance of African slaves. Empowered by his African ancestry, Herald begins to shine, that means he finds his song– the song of self-sufficiency. After finding his song, Herald Loomis says:

It was my song. It had come from deep inside me. I looked back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song. I was making it up out of myself. It got so I used up all of myself in the making of that song. It was within me. I am singing my song now. Thank God! I am singing my song. (274)

Finding his song means starting a new life as a free African American individual. Thus, the discovery of the music is a recovery of the past, the anti-bondage consciousness. Loomis's reclamation and rehabilitation of his song is a call to promoting self-sufficiency and a rediscovery of African cultural tradition.

So, the blues song is the music of each person's essential nature, his or her true identity. And, that identity, with its special rhythms, dictates the course of each one's destiny. The search for one's song is the quest for spiritual transcendence, a sensitive journey into the innermost depth to search for true identity. For Wilson the

blues is a supportive force that allows African Americans to transcend their hardships; the blues reawakens cultural consciousness and provides a new understanding of life.

### **Clash of Cultures: Christianity and African Tradition**

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is sprinkled with religious and folk images of Christianity and African cosmology. There is the combination of Christianity and African ideas. Some characters are inclined towards Christianity whereas some towards African tradition and some towards both. Wilson creates a dichotomy between Christianity and African traditional religion. As Seth says, "These niggers keep on coming, walking, riding, carrying their Bibles and guitars" (209), with a Bible and guitar they have religion and their African tradition– the blues. However, by the end of the play, Wilson has demonstrated through the character of Herald Loomis that the path to the true destinies of black people begins in their African roots: only when they embrace their African identities completely will they really be free.

At some points the two cultures coexist quite harmoniously, as in the case of Bertha or in the image of blacks migrating from South with their Bibles and guitars, emblems of Christianity and African tradition. Bertha's strength derives from a blend of two religious traditions perfectly synthesized in her abundant spirit. Although Bertha is a Christian woman, she also performs other rituals. On the same morning she can go to church like a good Christian and then return home "to sprinkle salt all over the house as a protection against evil spirits or line her threshold with pennies to keep witches at bay" (217). Having embraced Christianity she still remains connected to the music and rhythms that is centuries old and a culture whose pulse continues to beat in her. It is from these ancient rhythms that she fashion an elixir for all sadness, laughter that ripples forth like a benediction from the past. Says Bertha:

You hear me Mattie? I'm talking about laughing. The kind that comes from the way deep inside. To just stand and laugh and let life flow through you. Just laugh to let yourself know you are alive. [---] You get all that trouble off your mind and just when it look you ain't never gonna find what you want. You look up and it's standing right there.

(283)

This Afro-Christianity, with its blend of ritual and prayer, has informed Bertha's deepest sensibilities and shaped her identity as an African American.

Bynum, the root worker, on the one level, is an embodiment of African culture and ritual, yet his encounter with the shiny man bears patent traces of Christianity. He compares his wandering to that of missionary spreading the gospels, and his reference to the shiny man as "the one who goes before and shows the way" (210) could be an allusion to John the Baptist. The shiny man's blood that cleanses Bynum is, of course, an allusion to the redemptive qualities of Christ's blood, and the shiny man's glow may be an allusion to the transfiguration of Christ. Bynum says of this shiny man, "This fellow don't have no name. I call him John 'cause it was up around Johnstown where I seen him" (210).

Bynum calls the cleansing rituals conducted by the shiny man a baptism of blood. Says Bynum, "He told me to hold out my hands. [---] Told me to take and rub it all over me and said that was a way of cleansing myself" (212). "Although, John used water and promised that Christ would baptize them, the true baptism that cleansed the sin of Adam and opened the gate of heaven was the baptism of Christ the lamb" (Keller<sup>3</sup>). A more subtle Christian allusion buried in this moment refers to St. Paul's conversion which like Bynum's revelation opened his eyes to the secret of life.



Both took place on a road, both were accompanied by a shining light, and both resulted in lifetime mission of healing.

Though embraced with some traces of Christianity, Bynum, after all, is an African conjurer who is well aware of his rituals and tradition. He is a root worker who provides spiritual guidance to African Americans. He has a magical quality to bind them in traditional African style. The conversation between Seth and Bertha Holly suggests how Bynum is well aware of African rituals. Watching the ritual in which Bynum kills a pigeon and pours some of its blood into a cup, they talk to each other:

Seth: I believe he drink that blood.

Bertha: Seth Holly, what is wrong with you this morning? You know Bynum don't be drinking no pigeon blood.

Seth: I don't what he do?

Bertha: Well, watch him, then. He's gonna dig a little hole and bury that pigeon. Then he's gonna pray over that blood, pour it on top, mark out his circle and come on into the house. (205)

Seth is prone to see the ritual performed by Bynum as “mumbo jumbo nonsense” (205), as something uncivilized. But Bertha's immediate reproach to her husband for this fantasy suggests that Bynum is not so far outside social norms as Seth likes to believe. He is only performing African ritual for the betterment of African souls.

Bynum is a conjurer man whose craft is devoted to the reunion of lost and separated persons whom he binds physically and spiritually. Having attained spiritual illumination, he is capable of facilitating the same in others. In spite of his knowledge of the African folk and spiritual customs, he is nevertheless torn between two worlds. His visionary sequence reveals the conjunction of African and Christian motif.

Bynum's power is a negotiation between the religious heritage of western culture and the practices of African tradition.

But the two cultures, African and Christian, are not always in harmony. Herald Loomis's arrival introduces an element of tension that later deepens into physical and spiritual conflicts. A former deacon, he knows that his wife is to be found in a church, so that is where he goes. But he can not bring himself to enter it. When Seth hears that Herald has been standing outside the church, he assumes that he means to "rob the church" (220). But Herald does not want to rob the church. If anything the church has robbed him, for he was on church business when Joe Turner snatched him into slavery. He was forced to leave behind his wife who then, says Loomis, "married the Holy Ghost and changed her name to Martha Pentecost" (222). Faint remembrances from his cultural heritage have seeped through his racial consciousness into his soul, to be confronted there with the residues of his Christian beliefs. The result is spiritual disharmony. Herald prowls round the church of the boardinghouse because his spirit is set to do battle with it.

In one evening, when everybody except Herald performs juba—an African style song and dance mentioning the name of Holy Ghost, Herald enters in a rage, and tells them that the Holy Ghost is going to burn them up. He denounces Christianity, starting with his interruption of the juba dance which mentions the Holy Ghost. As Herald says to others, "you singing for the Holy Ghost to come? What he gonna do, huh? He gonna come with tongues of fire to burn up your woolly heads" (251). Now, Herald's real battle with Christianity has begun. The battle accelerates in the mystical climate created by juba dance, and his spirit explodes at the mentioning of the Holy Ghost. Demanding to know why the others ascribe so much power to the Holy Ghost, Herald challenges, "Why God got to be so big? Why he got to be bigger than me?"

(252). He is hurled one way, then the other, speaking in tongues as the subliminal struggle toward his new identity surfaces and climaxes in a Pentecostal trance.

Now Herald is totally ready to be free from the psychological and spiritual bonds that hold on him. Martha exhorts him to be faithful to the Christianity, to embrace Christianity once again, “Even if you done fell away from the church you can be saved again” (287). But in Herald’s view, it is the church, not he, that has sinned. Christianity is at the root of many of his problems and the problems of his people. White Christian men sold black Africans into slavery, and the white God, Jesus Christ, in whose name and under whose protective banner, plantation owners exploited their cotton-picking slaves, blessed his white disciples for their efforts. As Herald says in anger:

Great big old white man [---] your Mr. Jesus Christ standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. And he counting. He tallying up the cotton. “Well Jeremiah [---] what’s the matter, you ain’t picked but two hundred pounds of cotton today? Got to put you on half rations.” And Jeremiah go back and lay up there on his half rations and talk about what a nice man Mr. Jesus Christ is ’cause he gave him salvation after he die. Something wrong here. Something don’t fit right! (287-88)

Herald sees Christianity as the discursive mask of oppression. Since Christianity supported slavery, Herald can not bring himself to follow it. Martha tries to get Herald embrace Christianity, and quotes Bible passages to support the idea that Jesus Christ will save Herald. However, Herald’s response indicates that he is not interested in salvation in the next life; he wants equality in this life, and does not think he will get

it from the white man's god. Christianity engendered in blacks a passive resignation toward their fate. When the promise of salvation in the next world was offered as the panacea to all their problems, it created in them a proclivity for suffering, enabling the whites to continue their subjugation.

Herald Loomis directs his anger against Christianity because he believes that black men and women were exploited in the name of it. The Christianity in whose service he was labouring when Joe Turner kidnapped him, many atrocities during slavery were committed in the name of Christianity by owners who believed that their Christian upbringing endowed them with the moral authority to enslave Africans. Herald lost his religion when Joe Turner captured him, depriving him of his family and his freedom. He now recognizes the collusion between the religion and the racist state and can not bring himself to celebrate the white man's God, who demanded such sacrifices from him.

Herald now knows that Christianity has never brought relief from suffering, that the pledge of salvation is no balm for pain:

I been walking in the water. I been walking all over the River Jordon.  
 But what it get me, huh? I done been baptized with blood of the lamb  
 and the fire of the Holy Ghost. But what I got, huh? I got salvation?  
 My enemies all around picking the flesh from my bones. I'm chocking  
 on my own blood and all you got to give me is salvation? (288)

He needs the freedom of his life, not the rewards of the next. Herald is not interested in salvation in the next life; he wants equality and freedom in this life. That freedom can only come from a realization that he truly belongs to himself, not to Joe Turner, not Jesus Christ, but to Herald Loomis, former African slave and revitalized African American.

The Christian tradition finds its salvation in the suffering scapegoat figure of Christ the sacrificial lamb. Martha tells Herald that he must “be washed with the blood of the lamb” (288) for his salvation. Martha believes that the sacrificial blood of the lamb will make Herald clean his sins. This idea of blood inspires Herald to use his own blood to wash himself clean as he tells Martha, “I don’t need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself” (288). Then he slashes his chest with his knife, and wipes his blood on his face. It is an act that both defies Martha’s Christianity and affirms Herald’s belief in himself. The realization that the shedding of his own blood is both baptism and resurrection sweeps over him with a transcendental force that finally sets his spirit free. As he slashes himself across the chest and rubs his blood over his face, the conflict within him reaches its apogee and the African self emerges free.

Herald’s blood ritual is a clear refusal of Christ as the sacrificial subject. While his wife prays for his soul, Herald declaims against Christianity’s false pledge to alleviate the suffering of African Americans. He identifies Christ as an instrument of domination, encouraging African Americans to abide their maltreatment patiently and offering little more than abstract promises of happiness after death. Dismissing the idea that Christ can atone for his sins, Herald explains that he has done enough bleeding to warrant salvation on his own terms, and it is this moment that the play declares Herald’s “self sufficiency”, his liberation from western cultural and theological traditions. Herald’s transfiguration into the African medicine man is complete. It is at once a divestiture of his Christian identity and a full realization of his true identity as an African. Indeed, the old Christian Herald Loomis is lost forever and is being replaced by the emergence of a more complete African Loomis.

Loomis’s name Herald suits the title of Bynum’s shiny man i.e. one who goes before and shows the way. But he is no harbinger of Christianity like John the Baptist.

He shows the way to all the African Americans that they should embrace their African cultural and theological traditions rather than the western one. Martha, Herald's wife, also has distinctive name, in this case the new name of Pentecost. She was transformed from Martha Loomis to Martha Pentecost when she joins the evangelist church and moves to North. The name Pentecost suggests "the visitation of the Holy Ghost upon the disciples of Christ" (Keller<sup>1</sup>). This extremely religious name serves two purposes. First, it indicates that the Martha that Herald knew is dead, a fact that Martha indicates when she tells Herald that she waited five years for him before moving on with her life. Says Martha, "I killed you in my heart. I buried you. I mourned you. And then picked up what was left and went on to make life without you" (287). Just as Martha's name invokes the name of Holy Ghost, it also implies the death of both her marriage and her former identity. In addition to underscoring the death of Martha's old identity, her last name sets her up as Herald's main opponent, and also sets up Christianity as the main opponent of Africans who are in search of their own identity. So, Herald refuses to remain in company of his newly recovered wife Martha Pentecost. This refusal of Herald reveals his aversion to Christianity and western traditions.

The conflict between Christian and African cultures reaches a different resolution in each character. They reside harmoniously in Bertha, providing her a broad base to define her actions and her self. In Bynum, the Africanness flourishes, but there still are traces of Christianity in his apocalyptic experiences. Martha fully embraces Christianity. But Herald Loomis struggles with and rejects Christianity in favour of his Africanness. And finally he is able to discover his African self instead of Christianity.

### **Migration and Motives**

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* treats a transitional phase in African American history: the Great Migration. Over a period of twenty years, from 1910 to 1930, some hundreds of thousands of African Americans left rural area of the South for industrial cities of the North– New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and the city that is the setting of for August Wilson's play, Pittsburg. The historical context out of which the play evolves includes a backdrop of frustrated sharecroppers; hundreds of unemployed, unskilled labourers; countless broken families; and a pervasive rumor of a better life up North. This northward movement of African American was one of many such migrations that happened during the twentieth century, as many moved from the rural South to Northern cities.

The play is set in Seth's boardinghouse in the Northern city of Pittsburg where most of the characters are Southern migrants. This motive of their migration is to find better job, new life and new identity. August Wilson describes this massive influx of Southern blacks into the Northern cities as:

From the deep and near South the sons and daughters of the newly freed African slaves wander into the city. [---]seeking to scrape from the narrow, crooked cobbles and fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth. (203)

While traveling to North, the black migrants left racial violence and segregation in the South. They also left a Southern economy hurt by a boll weevil invasion that reduced cotton yields, low cotton prices and crisis in labour market. They were drawn to the North by the promise of higher wages and after 1916, by the employment possibilities created when First World War stopped the flow of European immigrant labour. In leaving for the industrialized cities of the North, the migrants hoped to find not only

higher wages but also economic and political equality, educational opportunities, and social justice.

When Bynum first meets Herald and asks where he and his daughter are coming from, Herald says, “Come from all over. Whichever the road take us that’s the way we go” (204). This was true for many African Americans at the time that they wander throughout the road in many Northern cities to escape from the racial intimidation of South. The symbolic answer of Herald suggests that their destiny lies in the very act of wandering. Later, Bynum refers to one of the causes of this mass migration when he is discussing the individual situation of Herald. Says Bynum, “See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song he goes off in search of it till he find out he’s got it with him all the time” (268). Bynum means to say that Herald wanders unknowingly throughout the road searching for his identity.

However, Herald is not the only character who wanders in the play. Bynum has wandered his whole life. Seth describes this wandering of Bynum and other blacks as:

I done seen a hundred Niggers like him. He’s one of them fellows never could stay in one place. He was wandering all around till he got old and settled here. These Niggers coming up here with that old backward country style of living. It’s hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting. Word get out they need men to work in the mill and put in these roads [---] and Niggers drop everything and head north looking for freedom. (209)

There is a fascination with travel for its own sake. For decades the urge to travel had been curbed but now that free movement was comparatively easy. Many blacks saw migration as the only way to maintain their sanity. The transition from their old social



identity as slaves to their new identity as free people lay in the very act of wandering. This in itself is a step toward self-empowerment, a reaffirmation of their freedom to go where they pleased without permission.

This migratory trend has been passed down to the new generation. Jeremy, one of the younger tenants, does not care when he loses his job. He gets fired when he refuses to pay an employment fee to one of the white men. This discriminatory behaviour of the white man unknowingly encourages Jeremy to wander for the better job, better life and better self. As long as Jeremy has blues song, he can set off down the road and go where it takes him. As he tells Seth, "There is a big road out there, I can get my guitar and always find me another place to stay. I ain't planning on staying in one place for too long noway" (235). While trying to create their new life and new identity, these migrants did not leave the positive aspects of their previous identity—the blues song. The blues is their culture, it is their tradition, and so it is everywhere in their blood. As a second emancipation, the migration represents a break with the past but also its preservation and adaptation. Though the migration entailed the abandonment of a long standing ideal of land ownership as the route to independence and the ability to recast the self as industrial worker and city dweller, the migrants did not leave their cultural heritage.

Jeremy lives with Mattie for a while, but feels tied down. When he finds Molly, a fellow traveler, he thinks he will be happy with her, and tries to encourage her to come with him. As Jeremy proposes Molly, "Don't you wanna travel around and look at some places with Jeremy? I need a like you to travel around with. With a woman like you beside him, a man can make it nice in the world" (265). Migration and motives that prompted it are typified in the peripatetic lifestyle of blues singers. Jeremy does not want to stay in one place for long time, he loves traveling. Life is

constant vacation for Jeremy, who would rather live a life of wandering than settle down with a job and a family. When he gets fired from his job, he is happy, because he does not want to be tied down. So, there is the fascination with travel in every character.

Thus, the migration is not merely a demographic or geographical shift but a historical transition to a new identity. By migrating to industrialized cities of the North, black Southerners affirmed their power to make themselves; they proved their longing for freedom through spatial mobility. This act grew out of migrants' consciousness of their identity as black Americans and their willingness to adapt and recreate the identity in a new urban, industrial context. It is a process of cultural self creation. In the play the image of movement, of traveling the roads serves as an apt metaphor for the search for self. The road suggests the passage from the South to North. It connects people to new opportunity and new ways to seeing the world. For Wilson's characters the journey also serves as a process to find themselves. So, the road represents the freedom of movement that had been denied them in slavery. The play presents this search as both personal and collective level. In spite of some differences, the migrants and established black community share a sense of ethnic identity which synthesizes much of the experiences of both groups and redefine African American cultural identity both North and South. The same pride in racial heritage and creating new identity is the central idea of the Great Migration.

So, Herald Loomis succeeds in rediscovering his African American identity and sense of self-worth at the end of the play. To rediscover his self, he finds the clues from the collective past and cultural roots. At the end, Herald also rediscovers his blues song— his true identity which he lost during the illegal enslavement to Joe Turner. Rediscovering his song means starting a new life as a free African American

individual. Thus, the discovery of the music is a recovery of the past, the anti-bondage consciousness; it is, after all, the discovery of his identity. Similarly, Herald sets himself free from all western cultural and theological practices and embraces his African self completely. So, Herald's story suggests that if the African Americans are to transcend their liminal existence, they should recover their African sensibilities. His experience proves that the true identity of blacks lies in their African roots.

#### IV. Conclusion

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* examines African Americans' search for their identity following the repression of American slavery. This search is primarily focused on Herald Loomis, a thirty two years old former deacon struggling to emerge from the white oppression of Joe Turner. Herald's plight is representative of many African Americans who felt cut off of their African heritage as a result of the crippling effects of slavery. For Herald, this search involves the physical migration from the South to Pittsburgh in an attempt to find his wife. Pittsburgh was one of the many urban areas in the North that other blacks migrated to in the 1910s in an effort to flee the discrimination they faced in the South, while attempting to find financial success in the North.

Herald's search for his identity is unsuccessful until he has embraced the pain of both his own past and the past of his ancestors and moved onto self-sufficiency. His experience shows that the path to the true identity of black people lies in their African roots. They will really be free when they embrace their Africanness completely. When he has a vision, Herald visits the souls of his ancestors, witnesses the genesis of his African American experience, and, from the dead, obtains the clues to his cultural identity and direction for his future. Before Herald can claim the legacy of empowerment left to him by his ancestors, he must confront and understand his own experience of oppression. Though the experience is part of Herald's personal past, it is also the experience similar to many African Americans and their ancestors. Herald's experience, then, is once again part of the collective past preserved for collective memory in a song.

Music is their strongest common bond, for it links them to all their roots. It is an integral part of their life. Their road to self-sufficiency begins by reconnecting

themselves with their past through music and rituals. By singing the blues song, Bynum uses collective memory to confront Herald with his personal loss and with the way this loss affects him. The song of loss and victimization has displaced Herald's own song—his identity.

Once Herald has understood the past in which he was victimized and has rejected the judgment of worthlessness where oppression forced upon him, it remains for him to say goodbye to what he has lost and reclaim the self that Joe Turner has not been able to take away. By acknowledging the past he is able to confront the judgment of worthlessness which keeps him bound to Joe Turner and counter it with his own truth. What Herald has lost is the life he had with his wife, Martha, before Joe Turner entered it. Reclaiming himself and translating a collective past to the present, Herald indeed becomes the shiny man who knows his song—his identity. He reestablishes his self through the acceptance of the collective past and by acquiring his own song.

The play is an Afro-Christian tapestry woven with threads from both traditions. In various ways, characters seek self-affirmation through constant spiritual negotiations between the symbols and customs of African and Christian mythology. However, Wilson proves through Herald Loomis that blacks' true identity lies in their African rituals—free from all western theological and cultural traditions. Herald believes that Christianity only becomes a means to dominate and exploit African Americans. They discover their real identity to be African, but not to be Christian. They discover their true origins not in Christianity but in the rich and varied cultures of Africa. The play urges the African Americans to move toward an uncompromised African American spirituality and consciousness.

Thus, August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is a wonderful play that appeals African Americans to embrace their African self totally if they want to be known as African Americans. They find their true identity not in western culture and tradition but in rich and varied culture and tradition of Africa. So, Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is about African Americans' search for identity into collective past, though, on its surface, it seems a story about new arrivals in the big city searching for lost relatives, jobs, adventure and love.

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