

The Analysis of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

The play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, written by August Wilson, is one of the plays featured in his Pittsburgh Cycle; which is a series of plays that explore the African-American experience in America. Each play in this series focuses on a specific decade from the 1900's, and this one in particular is set in the year 1911. As the story unfolds, there are several themes that continuously emerge throughout the play and these themes begin to establish the world that the play is set in. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is a story that explores spiritual heritage, migration and self-identity.

This story takes place in a boarding house located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania that is owned by Seth and Bertha Holly. Seth currently works a night shift and makes pots and pans for Rutherford Selig on the side while Bertha cooks and maintains the house. The boarding house was passed on from his father and he is very concerned with having a well-run house that does not cause any trouble. The only two guests staying in the boarding house when the play begins are Bynum Walker and Jeremy Furlow. Bynum, much to Seth's dislike, is someone who attracts too much attention due to his ritual practices that he performs out in the garden. He refers to himself as someone who "binds people together" and people come to him so that he can help them reunite with the ones who may have left or fallen out of love with them. Jeremy is a young man in search of a better life after leaving the south and migrating north. Although he seeks a better life, he lacks the motivation to strive for better things and is too concerned with playing guitar and finding the right woman. Rutherford Selig, the man Seth works with, is a peddler who is always on the road selling the pots and pans that Seth makes for him. He is also called a

“people-finder” because he can track down those who are missing while he is off traveling. His intentions, however, are not always the best. He often gets paid to help people leave town and then has others pay him to “find” them once time has passed.

The main events that take place in this play center around Herald Loomis, an older man who comes to stay at the boarding house with his daughter Zonia, while they search for his wife Martha. Seth does not have a good feeling about Harold the minute he meets him and worries that he will cause trouble. Herald has lost his way and is trying to find himself through the search for his wife. Mattie Campbell, a young woman, comes to Bynum so that he can help her get her husband back; but eventually ends up entangled with Jeremy. She is someone who depends on a man to get by whereas Molly Cunningham, who comes to stay at the boarding house, is a young independent woman only passing through on her own journey. Reuben Scott, a young boy who lives next door, befriends Zonia and they together represent youth and the hope for a better future. Many of these characters go on their own personal journeys throughout the play that often coincide with the major themes of the play.

One of the first themes that come to light within the play early on is the idea of spiritual heritage. You are introduced to this idea first by Bynum, who is referred to as a “conjure-man” or a “healer”. He believes he has the power to bind people together that cling to one another, in a spiritual sense. He does this by performing rituals in the garden using pigeons, as well as giving those who seek his help special “roots and powders”. Many of these elements can be found in African cultures and this represents many African-Americans trying to reclaim their own heritage during this time. For many of them, when their ancestors were brought here, they were stripped

of all sense of identity. The idea of reclaiming one's spiritual heritage is meant to help these characters make sense of the world that they are living in. Bynum's experience with the shiny man is an example of letting these beliefs guide them through a complicated world. This relates to the other themes of the play as well, because it acts a guiding hand through the journey of self-discovery.

Other elements of this is when the characters are gathered for dinner and they begin to Juba, which resembles Ring Shouts that African slaves would perform. It is a call and response dance that includes drumming and clapping and the words they chant mention the Holy Ghost. This too is another example of the characters reclaiming their spiritual heritage because during this ritual, they feel the most connected to their ancestors. "Spiritual realism often functions as an opportunity for characters to renew or redeem themselves through a process of rituals that allow them to reconnect their values and beliefs with sacred elements of the culture," (Ogoanah, 2014). The incident that Herald has at the end of act one is also a spiritual experience that helps make sense of the world around him and what he has gone through. His identity was taken away from him and he has resorted to some base instincts that come from his African heritage. The characters rely a lot on their spiritual heritage and is often a guiding hand when making choices.

Another theme that becomes apparent within the play, is the idea of migration. This play takes place less than fifty years after slavery was abolished; which leaves many African-Americans traveling north for a new life. This relates to many characters within the play such as Jeremy, Mattie, Molly, Bynum, and Herald because they all have strong ties to the south and in many cases, their experiences there have impacted their lives greatly. Jeremy decided to leave the

south when his woman left him, and he came up north to find work and start over. Mattie lived in Texas with her mother, who died from picking peaches in the fields, and came up north when she found her man Jack Carper. Mattie left the south because of what it did to her mother, but she may never have escaped that kind of life it hadn't been for being attached to Jack. Both of these characters had love as a motivation to leave the south, whereas Molly left because she is running from the kind of life her mother and father had. She doesn't know what she wants in life, but she knows she doesn't want to slave away at work and she can't trust a man to get her by.

Bynum's migration also had a free-spirit nature to it. He went on a journey to find himself, and eventually found his song after the "shiny man" showed him the way. Herald has had the worst experience in the south out of all the characters in the play. He was a free man who had been re-enslaved in a chain gang by the Tennessee's Governor's brother, Joe Turner. This ripped him away from his family for seven years, and when he returned his wife Martha had left to try to start a new life. This experience stole his identity from him, and as Bynum would describe it, it had lost his song. His journey up north to find his wife is really a journey for him to rediscover the song he once had. All of these characters represent what it was like to live in America at this time for African-Americans. When times get hard, people have the instinct of fight or flight, but many choose to runaway from their problems. Seth and Bertha holly represent the only ones who have roots in one place, but Seth is still on a journey of finding something more.

The most important theme of this play is the idea of self-identity. All of these characters in one way or another is searching for something in their life. Seth doesn't want to work night

shifts and be beholden to anyone. He wants to grow his pot and pan making skills into a bigger business by training others. Jeremy, Mattie, and Molly all represent a younger generation of people looking for a new start and a new identity. Molly and Mattie in particular let their experiences in the south influence who they were going to become. Molly wants to be independent without relying on anyone in this world and Mattie feels the need to be attached to someone just to get by. Herald's journey is the most representative of this.

As mentioned before, he has had his identity stolen from him after being re-enslaved, and although it seems like he is searching for his wife, he is really searching for his own identity. He utilizes spirituality to help him along the way to discovering his song. Bynum is an example early on of someone who went on this journey and has already found himself and who he wants to be. His story of the shiny man sets the stage for all of the other characters self-discovery that will happen throughout the play. This journey is not easy because it requires them to both find their own song internally as well as how they fit into the world around them once they do find it. Once these characters find themselves and determine what they want to do with their lives, they have to then learn how to accomplish those in a world that is set against them.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone is a play depicting the African-American experience during the early 1900's. August Wilson blends many themes and elements together to tell a story of self-discovery through the use of spiritual heritage, migration, and self-identity. Spiritual heritage acts as a guiding hand for most of the characters while migration is used as a tool to search for one's self. This is all done to help the characters make sense of the world that they are living in, as well as help them discover or re-discover their own identity and their place in the world.

Works Cited

1. Wilson, August. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone: A Play in Two Acts.*, 1988. Print.
2. Ogoanah, Felix Nwabefe. "The Emergent Properties of 'Song' as a Metaphor in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*." *Alicante Journal of English Studies / Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* [Online], 0.27 (2014): 143-162. Web. 25 Sep. 2020