

# **Literature PBAT**

**“They Can’t Stand Up: *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*”**

**Assessment: Good/Competent**

Unit: The Plays of August Wilson  
Essay: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Your topic ideas, brainstormed in class:

- How does Herald Loomis represent the human cost of convict leasing? Put another way: What does the play - particularly Herald Loomis - tell us about this era in American history?
- How does Bertha represent the ways that a fractured, displaced Black community looked out for each other at the turn of the 20th century?
- What theme or message does Jeremy represent?
- How does Seth represent the psychological legacy of slavery?
- How does the play illustrate America's continual, persistent alienation of African Americans?
- How does Wilson's affection for his characters convey a message about his people? In other words, how does his portrayal of these characters say something about the dignity or heroism of everyday people?
- How does this play tell the untold, unacknowledged story of America?
- Explain how the play illustrates a set of themes, e.g., loss/displacement, reunion, "finding one's song," liberation, etc.
- How does the play illustrate the importance of community and connection in healing the wounds of American history?
- How does the play communicate what was important to August Wilson? In other words, how does the play carry out Wilson's mission as an artist?
- What are the parallels between August Wilson's life and the play? Explain how/why this is important to our understanding of the text.
- What is the author's message?

Your assignment is to write a paper that argues and proves your interpretation of the text. Length does not matter - *you* decide how to argue your point. The paper can be as brief as a page and a half, or as long as eight pages; the key is clarity. Include intro and conclusion.

- Thesis statements must be approved by me.
- Outlines must be reviewed by at least one peer (they'll sign it), and approved by me.
- Rough drafts are due Wednesday, April 30 (handwritten or typed)
- Typed drafts must be reviewed by a peer, using the checklist and are due Friday,
- May 2 Final drafts are due Friday, May 9



### They Can't Stand Up

August Wilson's play Joe Turner's Come and Gone is set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1911. It was after the Civil War that slaves were freed and they migrated up north with their families, looking for better jobs and a better life; this was known as the Great Migration, and it was in full swing in the time period of the play. Wilson's characters still face racial oppression. Wilson, a famous African-American playwright, uses his play to show us an untold story about racial discrimination and brutality. Convict leasing was a terrorizing system that occurred after slavery was abolished; the southern economy plummeted after the Civil War, and there was a loophole in the 13th Amendment stated that no one should be enslaved except as punishment for a crime. This created a new system of slavery that was worse than slavery. Characters like Herald Loomis and Jeremy illustrate the face of many black men's struggles against discrimination and unfair treatment given to African-Americans in the South at the turn of the century.

Through his struggle to find himself and to let go of the past, Herald Loomis--who was a deacon at a church-- can't move past that traumatic state of mind. Herald Loomis was once a leased convict taken by Joe Turner. After being released as a result as a convict by Joe Turner, Herald Loomis goes on a mission to find his wife and finding himself. Joe Turney, brother of the governor of the state Tennessee, Pete Tumey, used his power to oppress Negroes into torment and imprison them through involuntary servitude. He was known as Joe Turner and he among many others took part in

convict leasing, a system that empowered white men to use black people for free labor, similar to slavery. Arresting African-American men forcing them to work in terrible conditions, exposing them to harmful toxic chemicals to pay off fictitious debt...This was sometimes worse than slavery; if someone died, he was simply replaced. This type of experience costs Herald Loomis his soul; he seems to live in a nightmare of what had happened to many other people like him. In Act Two: Scene Two, Loomis shares his hauntings with Bynum:

I done seen bones rise up out of the water. ..Bones walking on top of the water..walking without sinking down...a whole heap of them. They come out the water and start to walking ...They just walking across the water and then, they sunk down...one at a time they fell in the water...when they sink down they made a big splash and this wave come up...it washed them out of the water and up on the land. Only...only...They got flesh on them! Just like you and me. (Wilson 250)

Loomis' visions are a vivid reminder of how he was oppressed to, what he was haunted by, and what he couldn't move on from. The main reason he lost himself is because he was separated from his family, from his belief in God, and from his own identity. Joe Turner made Herald Loomis feel less of a person, a person with worth in life. In the middle of the play Loomis talks to Bynum about Joe Turner, "worthless is something you throw away. Something you don't bother with"(Wilson 269). Loomis does not understand why he was seen as such a worthless cause but was kept to do so many things. Loomis saw himself as nothing but a slave with no hope and no worth; this is how he lost his song, why he didn't know how to move on after he was a convict. All he thought about was finding his wife and daughter.

But when he finds his wife he dropped everything he felt he needed and found his song. In Act Two, Scene Five, Loomis finally finds his wife and argues with her about their religion:

And all I seen was a bunch of niggers dazed out their woolly heads. And Mr. Jesus Christ standing there in a middle of them...He grin that big old grin...and niggers wallowing at his feet. Great big old white man...your Mr. Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. (Wilson 288)

Loomis felt that he was betrayed by God and by the religion he worshiped, as a deacon of a church, he felt shattered that he was suffering for all the years he was held captive by Joe Turner. He suffers through that traumatic experience and all he could think about it how his Jesus betrayed him. As a victim of convict leasing, Loomis lost his faith, he lost his religion, and most importantly he lost his song. Like other black males caught up with the system of convict leasing, he is extremely oppressed; Loomis was a symbol of that huge weight hanging on their shoulders. Wilson showed us that he is a part of our history no one knew about; he uses Loomis to tell to everyone this missing link of our history.

Bynum teaches the reader that in order to find your song, you have to let go of the past. This play teaches us about self-discovery and the struggle to find your soul after a devastating trauma. Bynum uses Loomis' past against him in order from him to share his experience about Joe Turner. He observes, "Mr. Loomis done picked cotton. Ain't you, Herald Loomis? You done picked a bunch of cotton" (Wilson 267). Challenging him and his state of mind, Bynum encourages Loomis to think back more about his traumatic experiences. In guiding him to his song, Bynum wants to see Loomis rediscover his self:

Say when you looking at a fellow, if you taught yourself to look for it, you can see his song written on him. Tell you what kind of man he is in this world. Now I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see a man whos done lost his song, forgot how to

sing it. A fellow forgot that and he forgot who he is. Forget how he's suppose to mark down life. (Wilson 267)

Tempting him to burst, Bynum uses his kind of sense to channel the thoughts out of Loomis. Wilson uses Bynum as this spirit to help others find what they need in order to let go of the past and the suffering and find themselves as they once were, or even a better version of themselves. In this case, Bynum is helps Loomis reinvent himself. Loomis believed Bynum used his rootworking powers and put a 'bind' on him to help him and his daughter, Zonia, find Loomis' wife, but Bynum explains:

I ain't bound you, I bound that little girl to her mother. That's who I bound. You binding yourself. You bound onto your song. All you have to do is stand up and sing it, Herald Loomis. It's right there kicking at your throat. All you have to do is sing it. Then you be free. (Wilson 287)

Loomis took out his knife and cut across his chest, rubbing his blood all over him. What was so significant about this scene was that in a way, his blood was used as a catharsis; forcing him to let go of his oppressed emotions and eventually find relief. He found his song; Bynum guided him to it. Loomis gained self-sufficiency, a full resurrection and, cleansed from the frightening terrors of his past, he became "shiny like new money," as Bynum says (Wilson 289). Bynum is a symbol that is a reminder that oppressed blacks can overcome anything and regain this powerful voice within them.

We find that Seth believes in the white power structure; he believes that after blacks were freed from slavery they became criminals. Early in the play, Seth talks about Jeremy, a character who is arrested:

I don't go for all that carrying on and such. This is a respectable house. I don't have

no dunkards or fools around here. They got him down in jail. Getting drunk and acting a fool.

He down there where he belong with all that foolishness. (Wilson 209)

Seth represents an internalized racism that comes from a white power structure. He believe that black people -- primarily males-- are foolish ever since they were freed. Black males were demonized by white people back then, and like them, Seth always suspects that blacks are up to no good. In Act, Scene One, Seth thinks Loomis is up to something, Loomis is looking for his wife, but Seth who believes he knows where she is, says "I ain't told him nothing. The way the fellow look wasn't gonna tell him nothing. I don't know what he was looking for her for" (Wilson 221). Seth believes he's nothing but a corrupt person and that he is lying, as if Loomis was some sort of criminal. This is troubling, in the context of convict leasing, when huge numbers of African-American males were arrested under false charges in order to benefits the southern economy. Without slaves, how were plantation owners and industrialist going to make money? As vast numbers of African-American males were imprisoned, this created an image in the public mind that they are devils, that African-Americans that were freed were demonized. White southerners believed that they- should of never been freed in the first place. In Act One, Scene One, Seth tells us he thinks that without slavery "niggers are foolish":

These niggers coming up here with that old backward country style of living. It's hard enough now without all the ignorant kind of acting. Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish acting niggers. Work come out they need men to work in the mill and put in these roads...and niggers drop everything and head up north looking for freedom. They don't know white fellows looking too. White fellows come from all over the world. White fellow come over and in 6 months got more than what I got. But these niggers still



coming. Walking ...riding ...carrying their Bibles. (Wilson 209)

Seth believes that he has to align himself with whiteness, which reminds readers of blacks who "pass" as white. When a black person is passing, they have to cut their family, friends and their culture in order to be seen as some kind of equal, in order to receive better advantages. They have to separate from their roots and judge other blacks in the eyes of the white man. Wilson's message that he preserves in Seth is that he represents how white people only view African-Americans as criminals and how they cause nothing but violence. However his play shows us how convict leasing portrayed them that way then and now. Since no one really knew about convict leasing, then there was this question about why African-Americans face even more oppression than they did back then, August Wilson shows us that.

By contrast, the character Jeremy represents this strong sense of black pride and no matter what he won't stand for the demands of the overpowering white man. In Act One, Scene One, Jeremy was talking to Seth about his interaction with a white man at his job:

They fired me. White fellow came by told me to give him fifty cents if I wanted to keep working. Going around to all them other fellows, they just giving it to him. I kept hold and they fired me. (Wilson 261)

Jeremy, like Loomis, experiences inequality that is similar to convict leasing, as the white man is using the labor of black people to collect their own wages, to benefit them and the southern economy. Jeremy didn't believe in supporting them as they took from everyone else. But Seth defends the white man and believes Jeremy should have given him the money:

I see you gonna learn the hard way. You just looking at the faces of it. See, right now, without a job you ain't nothing. What you gonna do when you can't keep a roof over your head? (Wilson 261)

Most people won't stand for giving money, but if you have no choice, you must uphold your pride and provide for yourself. Seth didn't believe that Jeremy could make but himself. He thinks he was better off listening to the white man and paying him the money, but Jeremy doesn't agree he earned his money and he wanted to keep it:

I don't make nothing but eight dollars. Why I got to give him fifty cents of it?

He go around to all the colored people and he got ten dollars extra. That's more than I make in a whole week...don't make no difference. There's a big world out there. I can get my guitar and always find me another place to stay. (Wilson 261)

Jeremy echoes Wilson's vision of his mother, Daisy Wilson and how she stood up for what she deserved. She knew when to walk away from a dubious deal offered by a sly white person; as she used to say "something is not always better than nothing". As she faced a situation in a contest she won for a brand new washing machine, when they found out that she was black she was offered a prize of less value. Daisy Wilson lives on in Jeremy, representing a sense of black pride, no matter who tries to bring them down, they will always find away to stand back up.

Between the era of convict leasing and today, there's a thread of history in which black people face major problems like discrimination and police brutality. Politics like "stop and frisk", racial profiling and bad blood between police and black communities are all part of this chain that started from slavery. August Wilson not only showed us a part history that was hidden from us, but he also showed us the major reason why African-Americans face the problems they do now. The number of incarceration rates for African-American males in America is up to 2.3 million people as jails and prisons consume a growing portion of \$200 billion profit for putting them in jail. Nearly 47% of black males in America

were wrongfully accused for crimes they did not commit. Black males primarily face police brutality

in events like the "LA riots" also known as the "Rodney King Riots" where a man named Rodney King was brutally beaten by Los Angeles police officers after he was accused of speeding by the police. The reason why African-American males face problems like this is because police brutality stemmed off of convict leasing as there are other links coming from that chain. Convict leasing was this missing link that resulted to these types of outcomes.

