Joe Turner's Come and Gone

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AUGUST WILSON

The fourth of six children, Wilson was raised in a poor neighborhood of Pittsburgh predominately populated by black Americans, as well as Italian and Jewish immigrants. Upon the divorce of his mother and father in the 1950s, Wilson and his family moved to Hazelwood—a mainly white, working-class section of Pittsburgh where their appearance, as a black family, wasn't met with open arms. Facing racist rage—their Hazelwood home had bricks thrown through its windows—they soon moved to a new home. Dropping out of high school in the tenth grade after being falsely accused of plagiarizing a twenty-page paper on Napoleon I, Wilson worked odd jobs and made great use of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Library. The gifted Wilson had learned to read at age four, and ultimately received an honorary high school diploma from the library for the precocious extent to which he educated himself with its books. Best known for his plays *Fences*, *The Piano Lesson* (both of which won the Pulitzer Prize), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson once said that his work was most influenced by "four B's"—blues music, the writers Jorge Luis Borges and Amiri Baraka, and Romare Bearden, a painter. Wilson ultimately wrote sixteen plays, ten of which comprised what is called his Pittsburgh Cycle (or Century Cycle), as nine of them take place in the city's Hill District, an African-American neighborhood. Wilson died at the age of 60 in Seattle, from liver cancer, leaving a legacy behind him as one of the twenty century's most prominent playwrights.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Joe Turner's Come and Gone takes place nearly 50 years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared all slaves legally free. Because the Civil War didn't end until 1865, though, the full effects of this legal action weren't immediately brought to bear on the nation. Even when the Union finally defeated the Confederacy—thereby enforcing the abolition of slavery throughout all of the United States rather than just in the North—African Americans still faced strong forms of systematized racism. For example, a man known as Joe Turney (or Joe Turner), the brother of the governor of Tennessee, was employed by law enforcement to travel with and deliver convicts to a prison in Nashville, but he often sold black prisoners—many of whom had only committed petty crimes—to farmers along the Mississippi who needed workers. Often times, black men were even framed as having broken the law for this exact purpose. One common way Turney's men framed them was by staging gambling games on the roadside and manipulating African Americans to join as they passed. Once the passerby started playing, officers would descend on the scene and round up the supposed lawbreakers, eventually turning them over to Turney. This piece of history is what Wilson bases Herald Loomis's backstory on, as Loomis explains that he stopped to preach to several gamblers and was suddenly taken hostage by Joe Turner. In fact, Joe Turner's influence on the South was so pervasive that a blues song circulated about him, based on what people would say when somebody asked why the majority of a town's black men were missing: "They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

August Wilson wrote a series of plays called *The Pittsburgh Cycle*. This collection of pieces—also known as *The Century Cycle*—consists of ten plays, all of which document the nature of African-American life in a given decade of the twentieth century. The first play that Wilson wrote in this cycle is *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which takes place in the 1920s and is the only piece in the entire group that isn't set in Pittsburgh. The rest, including *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (documenting the 1910s), take place in Pittsburgh's Hill District. Furthermore, some plays in the cycle—which includes famous works like *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*—even share several of the same characters and specific locations.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Joe Turner's Come and Gone
- **When Published:** The play initially debuted as a staged reading in 1984, and then appeared separately on stage in 1986, 1987, and 1988.
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism/Contemporary Literature
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** A Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911.
- **Climax:** Upon seeing his wife, Martha, after many years, Herald Loomis slashes his chest with a knife and rubs his body with blood, declaring that he finally feels as if he's standing on his own two feet. As he exits Seth's boarding house, Mattie Campbell runs to join him, and Bynum yells, "Herald Loomis, you shining!"
- **Antagonist:** The long-lasting effects of racism, which reverberate throughout America in the aftermath of slavery.

EXTRA CREDIT

The Blues. When *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* appeared on

Broadway in 2009, the renowned blues singer and guitar player Taj Mahal provided musical accompaniment.

Controversy. When he was alive, August Wilson insisted that his major productions be directed by black people, not white people. After his death, though, many white directors began staging his pieces, a fact that has sparked controversy in the theater world.

PLOT SUMMARY

In the opening scene of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Seth talks to his wife, Bertha, in the kitchen of their boarding house. Looking out the window at Bynum, one of the house's boarders, Seth narrates the old man's strange actions, voicing his disapproval of the spiritual ritual Bynum is undertaking in the garden. Bynum is a "conjure man," or a man who practices folk magic. A pragmatic craftsman who spends his time making pots and pans, Seth is suspicious of Bynum's superstitious ways, but Bertha tells him to leave the old man alone. As their conversation continues, Bynum comes inside and sits down for breakfast. Together, Seth, Bertha, and Bynum talk about a young man named Jeremy, who also lives in the boarding house. Apparently, Jeremy spent the previous night in jail, a fact that unnerves Seth, who wants to keep a respectable household. When Bynum stands up for Jeremy, saying he just has "a lot of country in him" that will fade away, Seth says, "Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish-acting niggers. 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. They don't know the white fellows looking too."

Eventually, a white man named Selig enters the kitchen and sells Seth aluminum. The two men agree that Seth will make dustpans out of the aluminum, which Selig will retrieve the following week and then sell door-to-door. Selig is known as a "people finder" because he can track people down for a small fee while going town to town selling his wares.

Bynum asks about a man he paid Selig to find, a "shiny man" he once encountered while walking on a long unfamiliar road. Bynum explains that this "shiny man" told him to follow along because he wanted to show him something, claiming that if Bynum came with him, he'd show him the secret of life. Eventually, the two men turned a corner in the road, and suddenly the strange man rubbed blood all over himself and instructed Bynum to do the same. Then this man was shining all over until, abruptly, he vanished. At this point, Bynum came upon the spirit of his dead father, who told him he was going to show him "how to find [his] song." His father then taught him this "song" and told him that if he ever sees a shiny man again, he'll know his song has been accepted, at which point he can lie down "and die a happy man." Finishing his story, Bynum explains that his "song" is the "Binding Song," meaning he can join people together.

Jeremy comes home from the jailhouse and sits down to eat a large breakfast under Seth's scornful gaze, and Selig departs. Jeremy explains that the only reason he got arrested the night before is because the police officers found out he'd just been paid two dollars for working on the town's new bridge, and they wanted to confiscate this money for themselves. Meanwhile, a strange man and his daughter arrive in the doorway. The man's name is Herald Loomis, a shady looking character. Loomis asks if he and his eleven-year-old daughter, Zonia, can rent a room in Seth's house, and Seth haggles with them until they reach an agreement. Loomis then asks if anybody in the room knows a Martha Loomis, his wife, whom he's trying to find. Nobody can answer this question, but Bynum suggests Loomis pay Selig to find Martha.

Seth brings Loomis and Zonia upstairs to get settled, and when he returns to the kitchen, he says he doesn't like the looks of Loomis. "Something ain't right with that fellow," he says. He explains that he realized while talking to Loomis upstairs that the woman he's looking for is somebody he himself knows as Martha Pentecost, who lives near a church just outside town. However, he says that he didn't tell Loomis about Martha Pentecost because he doesn't trust him; "The way that fellow look I wasn't gonna tell him nothing. I don't know what he looking for her for." At this point, a young woman named Mattie Campbell appears looking for Bynum, who she asks to work his magic to bind her to her lover, Jack Carper, who has recently left her. Bynum tells her that if Jack has left, it's probably better not to bring him back. Instead, he gives her a small cloth that supposedly brings luck. Jeremy then starts talking to Mattie, telling her she ought to spend some time with him while she waits for Jack. The two decide to go to a **guitar** contest that night, where Jeremy plans to win money with his beautiful playing. During this time, Zonia goes outside and meets a young boy, Reuben, who lives next door. When Reuben asks where her mother is, Zonia says that she and her father have been wandering and trying to find her. Reuben asks why she left in the first place, and Zonia says, "I don't know. My daddy say some man named Joe Turner did something bad to him once and that made her run away."

The following week, Seth and Bertha are in the kitchen, where Seth again insists that there's something suspicious about Loomis. Bertha tries to dissuade him of this notion, and when Bynum enters, he too tries to convince Seth otherwise, saying, "He just a man got something on his mind." Not long thereafter, Selig arrives and pays for the dustpans Seth has made. Loomis then comes into the kitchen and pays Selig to find his wife, and the two strike an agreement that Selig will try to find her before he returns to the boarding house the following Saturday.

The next day, as Seth and Bertha get ready for church, Jeremy reveals that he won the guitar contest the previous night, and

that he and Mattie had a great time together. As such, she's going to move into his room, so he pays Seth the extra cost of feeding her. After Bynum and Jeremy talk about the difference between lust and love—a distinction Jeremy seems to have trouble understanding—a young woman named Molly Cunningham knocks on the door and asks Seth if she can rent a room. A remarkably attractive woman, she tells Seth she likes to have "company" from time to time, which he says is acceptable as long as she isn't disrespecting the house by working as a prostitute. When Molly leaves to go to the outhouse, Jeremy jumps up from his chair and watches her through the window.

Later that evening, as the boarders are eating dinner and chatting, Seth suggests that Jeremy get his guitar, and they all start doing the "Juba," a collective song performed in a call-and-response style "reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves." They jump around and drum the table, chanting about the Holy Ghost until Loomis storms in and screams at them, telling them to stop. "You all sitting up here singing about the Holy Ghost. What's so holy about the Holy Ghost?" Working himself up, he laments, "Why God got to be so big? Why he got to be bigger than me? How much big is there? How much big do you want?" Saying this, he starts unzipping his pants, and Seth yells at him to stop. Loomis then begins speaking in tongues and dancing around the room, saying, "You all don't know nothing about me. You don't know what I done seen. Herald Loomis done seen some things he ain't got words to tell you." Just as he's about to exit, he collapses, petrified by a vision. Bynum crouches over him, asking what he's seen, and Loomis fitfully explains that he's seen "bones rise up out the water. Rise up and walk across the water." Bynum helps him along, repeating his words and asking him questions. Loomis says that he suddenly found himself in a place with "water that was bigger than the whole world." As he watched the bones walking on the water, they suddenly sank, and then an enormous wave carried them to the shore, breaking over the banks, at which point the bones inexplicably had "flesh on them," and black people washed up on the sand and simply lay there, along with Loomis himself. Loomis then says that he couldn't stand up, although the other people (the ones who just washed up on the shore) were standing and saying goodbye to one another and "walking down the road." "I got to get up!" Loomis screams, and as he tries to stand (in real life), he collapses right as the lights go out.

The following morning, Seth tells Loomis he can't stay in the boarding house anymore because of his antics the previous night, but Loomis reminds him that he's already paid for the full week, so Seth agrees to let him remain until Saturday. After this conversation, Jeremy comes home and says he's been fired from his job working on the bridge. Apparently, the white bosses went around to the black employees and demanded they pay fifty cents to keep their jobs. Jeremy refused, and so he was fired. Seth thinks Jeremy's decision is absurd, but Jeremy shrugs it off, saying, "Don't make me no difference. There's a big road out there." Eventually, everybody but Jeremy and Molly file out of the kitchen, and although Jeremy has already started living with Mattie, he makes plans to run off with Molly.

While Seth and Bynum play dominos, Bynum sings a song about Joe Turner that brings Loomis into the room. Hearing the song, Loomis demands that Bynum stop singing, and it eventually comes to light that Loomis himself was captured by Joe Turner, the brother of the Governor of Tennessee. Apparently, Joe Turner hunts down black men and essentially enslaves them for seven years at a time. One day, Loomis explains, he was walking down the road and saw a group of men gambling. Because he was a preacher at the time, he stopped to try to convert these sinners, at which point Joe Turner descended with his men and captured Loomis, separating him from Martha and Zonia for seven years. When he was finally released, he went looking for Martha, but only found Zonia living with her grandmother. Since then, he has been traveling everywhere to find Martha. "I just wanna see her face so I can get me a starting place in the world," he says.

When Saturday finally rolls around, Seth kicks Loomis out before Selig arrives. As such, Loomis stands at the end of the road, waiting to see if Selig has found his wife. Sure enough, Selig enters the kitchen along with Martha. Seeing this, Loomis comes back and greets his wife, who desperately explains that the reason she left Zonia behind was because she was traveling north in order to find financially viable living options, since after Loomis was captured she couldn't sustain the family. Because the journey north was dangerous, she left Zonia with the girl's grandmother. "Now that I see your face I can say my goodbye and make my own world," Loomis says. He then instructs Zonia to go with her mother so that she can grow up having learned from both male and female role models. At this point, Bynum reveals that he bound Zonia to Martha, but didn't bind Loomis to Martha because "you can't bind what don't cling." This sets Loomis off, and he says, "Everywhere I go people wanna bind me up." Martha, in response, insists that Loomis needs to find his way back to religion, and urges her estranged husband to return to the church. She tells him that Jesus bled for him, but he contends that he can "bleed for [him]self." She tells Herald he needs "be something," and to find meaning in life, but Loomis is not persuaded. Instead, he cuts himself across the chest and rubs the blood on his face, saying, "I'm standing! I'm standing. My legs stood up! I'm standing now!" As he walks outside, Bynum calls after him, saying, "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!"

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Seth Holly – A middle-aged African-American craftsman who runs a boarding house with his wife, Bertha. Seth is a straightforward thinker, a man inclined to follow rules and work hard even when he's receiving unfair treatment. Skilled at fashioning pots and pans, he dreams of teaching a small group of men his craft and opening his own shop instead of working for rich white men. Because of his deep sense of pragmatism, he's highly suspicious of the folk magic that Bynum, one of his residents, practices in the yard. To this end, he constantly criticizes the old man for bringing nonsense into his home. Similarly, he makes it clear to all his residents that he won't tolerate anything under his roof that might make the house seem unworthy of respect. This is why he so vehemently dislikes Herald Loomis, whom he mistrusts partly because Loomis is looking for a woman he claims is his wife. As it so happens, Seth knows the woman he's looking for—for the past several years, she has been going by Martha Pentecost, but Seth decides not to tell Loomis this because he doesn't know what Loomis intends to do when he finds her. When Loomis speaks out against Christianity one night and then proceeds to speak in tongues and fall to the floor while having a frightening vision, Seth decides once and for all to kick him out. Because Loomis has already paid through the week, though, Seth has to let him stay. Even still, he reminds the poor man on a daily basis that he will need to pack up and leave at the end of the week.

Bynum Walker – A "conjure man" or "rootworker" (somebody who practices folk magic and healing) who lives in Seth and Bertha's boarding house. Bynum is a wise, existential man who believes that every person has a "song" they must not only identify within themselves but also make "harmonize" with the outside world. Bynum's own song is the "Binding Song," meaning that he can join people together. He chose this song, he explains, because when he was a young man traveling from town to town he kept seeing "people walking away and leaving one another." In a conversation with Selig in Bertha and Seth's kitchen, Bynum describes how he discovered that each person has a "song," telling him that he met a "shiny man" who showed him to a place in the road where he spoke to his dead father's spirit. At this point, Bynum's father taught him his "song" and told him that if he ever saw a "shiny man" again, he would know that his "song had been accepted and worked its full power in the world and [he] could lay down and die a happy man." This is why Bynum has hired Selig—the town's "people finder"—to track down this shiny man. When Herald Loomis arrives at the boarding house, Bynum immediately seems to understand him, standing up for the strange and wearied man when Seth berates him. Indeed, it's Bynum who speaks with Loomis when Loomis has his strange visions, and when he cuts himself across his chest and rubs blood over his body at the end of the play, Bynum shouts, "Herald Loomis, you shining!" The audience also learns in this scene that Bynum has bound Zonia—Loomis's daughter—to Martha.

Herald Loomis – A man who appears with his daughter, Zonia, at Seth and Bertha's boarding house. Although Seth thinks he looks suspicious, he allows him to rent a room. While staying in the house, Herald searches for his wife, Martha, whom he's apparently been looking for after many years, roaming from town to town with Zonia. Seth, for his part, realizes that the Martha Loomis that Herald is looking for actually lives just outside of town and goes by the name Martha Pentecost. Nonetheless, he keeps this information to himself, and so Herald continues searching for his wife, even paying Selig—the town "people finder"—to track her down. Selig promises to return the following Saturday with information, but while he waits, Herald falls further out of Seth's good graces. For starters, he renounces Christianity one night, unzips his pants, speaks in tongues, and collapses whilst undergoing some kind of supernatural vision (which Bynum helps him narrate). Later, Loomis reveals that he was captured years ago by Joe Turner, the brother of the governor of Tennessee. Apparently, Joe Turner hunts down black men and forces them to labor for him for seven years at a time. When Herald was finally released, he discovered that Martha had left Zonia with the girl's grandmother, and so he took his daughter and started searching for his wife. He tells Bynum and Seth that he just needs to see her face so that he can get a "starting place in the world." When Selig finally brings Martha to him, he has a cathartic experience, cutting his chest and finally feeling like he can begin life again as an individual. As he walks out the door, Bynum yells after him, saying, "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!"

Bertha Holly – Seth's wife, and the co-owner of the boarding house. Although Seth doesn't like Bynum's folk magic, Bertha partakes in some of the old man's rituals. Seth criticizes her for this, pointing out that she is combining Bynum's spiritualism with Christianity, along with other, simpler superstitions. Despite his criticism, she merely says, "It don't hurt none. I can't say if it help...but it don't hurt none." By saying this, she reveals her flexibility, her willingness to embrace multiple worldviews. This is the temperament responsible for her easygoing nature and her ready acceptance of people like Bynum and even Herald Loomis, men her husband doesn't trust.

Jeremy Furlow – A cheerful young man who lives in Seth and Bertha's boarding house. Jeremy works for white employers as one of many people installing a new bridge. In the play's opening scene, he comes home from having spent the night in jail because, he explains, two police officers incarcerated him in order to confiscate the two dollars he and his friend had just been paid. Jeremy is a proficient **guitar** player who carries himself with confidence, giving "the impression that he has the world in his hand, that he can meet life's challenges head on." He retains this optimism even when he's fired from working on the bridge. As he explains it to Seth, his white employers went around to all the black workers and demanded that they pay

fifty cents in order to retain their jobs. Jeremy thought this was a ridiculous request, so he refused and, thus, was fired. When Seth tells him he's crazy for giving up a good job, he says, "Don't make me no difference. There's a big road out there." In keeping with this outlook, he shortly thereafter runs off with Molly Cunningham, even though he has just started living with Mattie Campbell.

Rutherford Selig – A white man who sells materials to Seth and then buys them back once he's made them into pots, pans, or dustpans. Taking Seth's goods, Selig goes door-to-door, selling the wares and giving Seth a cut of the profits. Because he travels so widely as a salesman, he's known as a "people finder," somebody capable of tracking down lost love ones for people who pay him to do so. Bynum, for example, has paid Selig to find his "shiny man." When Herald Loomis arrives in Seth's boarding house, he hires Selig to track down Martha, his wife. In the play's final scene, Selig makes good on his promise and brings Martha into the kitchen. Another important thing to know about Rutherford Selig is that he comes from a long line of "bringers and finders." Indeed, his great-grandfather brought Africans to America to sell them into slavery, his father used to track down escaped slaves or plantation owners, and now—in the decades after slavery has been abolished—he himself finds black people for other black people.

Mattie Campbell – A young woman who comes to Seth and Bertha's boarding house to see Bynum so that she can ask him to bind her to Jack Carper, her lover who recently left her. Apparently, Mattie and Jack had two children, but they both died as babies, at which point Jack told Mattie she must have a "curse" on her. He then ran off. Bynum tells Mattie that some people aren't supposed to be brought back, and that because the babies died, Jack isn't "bound" to her. He tells her that Jack is clearly being called toward somebody else. Disappointed, Mattie remains in the kitchen, where Jeremy begins talking to her, eventually convincing her to let him keep her company while she waits for her true lover to return. After she and Jeremy go out that night, Mattie moves into Jeremy's room with him, but he quickly abandons her by running away with Molly Cunningham. Mattie remains in the boarding house, where she and Herald Loomis develop something of a romantic tension, though they never consummate this interest. When Loomis bolts out the door at the end of the play, having just achieved a sense of "self-sufficiency," Mattie runs after him.

Molly Cunningham – An independent young woman who comes to stay in Seth and Bertha's boarding house. Molly makes it clear that she's happy as a single woman unencumbered by romance. In a conversation with Mattie, she reveals that she once had a lover who left her, and since then she's never entertained the idea of settling down with anybody. Jeremy is intensely attracted to Molly and eventually convinces her to run off with him, saying that they can just travel around together without having to make any commitments.

Zonia Loomis – Herald and Martha Loomis's daughter, who has been traveling from town to town with her father in the hopes of finding Martha. When Zonia and Herald arrive at the boarding house, Seth agrees to take them on if Zonia will help Bertha with the cooking and cleaning. While her father searches for her mother, Zonia spends time in the yard, talking to the neighboring boy, Reuben, who she eventually lets kiss her. When Martha finally returns, Herald insists that Zonia go live with her mother, though she doesn't want to. She clings to Herald, saying, "Take me with you till we keep searching and never finding!"

Martha Loomis (Martha Pentecost) – Herald Loomis's wife, and Zonia's mother. After Herald was captured by Joe Turner, Martha had trouble sustaining Zonia and herself financially, so she left Zonia with her own mother and traveled north, following the family's church. After establishing herself in the north, she returned to fetch Zonia, but Herald had already come and taken the young girl. Martha then lived for a brief period in Seth and Bertha's boarding house before moving just outside town to be near the church. When she finally sees Herald, she tries to convince him to return to Christianity, telling him that Jesus bled for him and that he can't "just be alive"; "Life don't mean nothing unless it got a meaning," she says, but she's unable to convince her husband.

Reuben Scott – A young boy who lives next door to Seth and Bertha's boarding house. Reuben befriends Zonia, eventually kissing her and telling her that when he grows up, he's going to come looking for her. Reuben also talks extensively about his young friend, Eugene, who has recently died. Apparently, Reuben promised Eugene that he'd set the young boy's collection of **pigeons** free, but when Eugene died, Reuben couldn't stand to do so. Instead, he sells them one by one to Bynum for the old man's strange rituals, which is what Eugene did when he was alive.

Eugene – A young boy who has died before the beginning of the play. Eugene used to keep a collection of **pigeons**, which he sold one by one to Bynum for the old man's strange rituals. Just before dying, Eugene made Reuben—his best friend—promise to set the pigeons free. Despite this, Reuben can't bear to let the pigeons go, instead selling them to Bynum like Eugene used to do.

Joe Turner – The brother of the governor of Tennessee, and based on the historical figure Joe Turney. Joe Turner captures groups of black men and forces them to work for him, essentially enslaving them. After seven years, he lets them go. When Herald Loomis was a preacher, he stopped on the road one day to speak to a group of gamblers, at which point Joe Turner and his men descended upon the scene and captured him. Even though Loomis was set free after seven years of forced labor, Joe Turner still looms large in his mind, having broken up his family and derailed his life's trajectory.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jack Carper – Mattie Campbell's former lover, who left her after their two children died as babies. When Mattie tries to get Bynum to bind her to Jack again, he refuses because Jack has clearly been bound to somebody else.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MIGRATION AND TRANSIENCE

Joe Turner's Come and Gone is a play characterized by transience. Because they're temporary boarders without permanent homes of their own, all the people living in Seth's boardinghouse embody the human desire to wander and search. New faces arrive without warning, while prominent characters like Jeremy set off to find a new life before the play has even ended. That this sense of rootlessness runs throughout the play aligns with the historical and cultural moment of 1911, when the first several generations of free African-Americans gradually migrated northward with the hopes of establishing new lives in cities unmarred by slavery. Unfortunately, this journey didn't always lead to stability and freedom, and many of those who undertook it found themselves moving continually from town to town, searching for a better life or a secure job. By highlighting various characters' states of restlessness, Wilson shows that they yearn for something more—something that's currently missing in their lives. After a legacy of 400 years of slavery in America, Wilson's characters are searching desperately for a foothold in the world, trying to establish lives for themselves in what for them is a still shifting and settling new world order. Interestingly enough, this effort to go off looking for independence often becomes an end in and of itself, and many of the people who move through Seth's boarding house wind up traveling for the sake of traveling, searching for the sake of searching. As such, Wilson portrays transience as a temperament shaped both by history and by a *grass is always greener* mentality.

Many characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* see travel as a way of running away from undesirable circumstances. The audience largely experiences this in a secondhand way, glimpsing the effect of abandonment on people like Jeremy, Mattie Campbell, Herald Loomis, and Molly Cunningham, who have all had lovers disappear on them. After hearing Mattie tell Bynum that her longtime lover left her, Jeremy says, "Had me an old gal did that to me. Woke up one morning and she was gone. Just took off to parts unknown. I woke up that morning and the only thing I could do was look around for my shoes. I woke up and got out of there. Found my shoes and took off. That's the only thing I could think of to do." This is an interesting moment because Jeremy's story reveals the cyclical nature of travel-related escapism. His "old gal" left him because—presumably—she no longer loved him and thus didn't want to live with him anymore, thereby fleeing and escaping circumstances she no longer found desirable. This is rather common, but what's notable is that Jeremy responds to this by doing the exact same thing—upon waking up and discovering his lover has left, he decides to run away, too. In doing so, he demonstrates the knee-jerk reaction many people have when something goes wrong: they immediately evacuate, setting off for new lives in an attempt to outrun sadness, adversity, or hardship.

Jeremy isn't the only character in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* to exemplify the cyclical nature of migration and transience. Indeed, this migratory impulse is passed down through generations, manifesting itself in the conversation young Zonia and Reuben have about their blossoming childhood love. After they kiss for the first (and then second) time, Reuben says to Zonia, "You my girl, okay?" Zonia agrees, and then Reuben says, "When I get grown, I come looking for you." Children who aren't surrounded by wanderers would most likely draw a different conclusion about their future than Reuben draws in this moment—they would assume that now that they've kissed each other, they'll be together forever. However, the majority of the adults in Reuben and Zonia's lives drift from place to place, some of them searching for old lovers. As such, it's only natural that Reuben would think telling Zonia he'll "come looking for [her]" is the ultimate expression of love. Likewise, this suggestion must not sound out of the ordinary to Zonia, who is herself traveling with her father from town to town in search of her mother. In this way, Wilson illustrates how a sense of rootlessness can develop at a young age, creating entire families of people who are likely to live much of their lives on the road. In turn, the audience begins to understand how this transient mentality is historically shaped as it moves from generation to generation.

Although many characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* use migration to escape hardship, there are, of course, other reasons why people lead lives of transience. Indeed, economic incentives coax people north, and they pass through Seth's boarding house on their way to find new work. Regarding this, Seth remarks, "Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish-acting niggers. 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. They don't know the white fellows looking too. White fellows coming from all over the world. White fellow come over and in six months got more than what I got. But these niggers keep on coming." In

this moment, Seth speaks pessimistically about the wisdom of migrating for economic purposes, suggesting that the fantasy of prosperity blinds black migrant workers to the harsh reality of the new post-slavery world—a world in which white people still triumph over black people. Nonetheless, the promise of economic prosperity remains a compelling reason for people to move, as evidenced by what Jeremy says when Seth criticizes him for willingly giving up his job; "Don't make me no difference. There's a big road out there." This is exactly the kind of thinking Seth calls "foolish." Jeremy's apathy about losing his job aligns with Seth's notion that people too often "drop everything" upon hearing even the slightest suggestion of new possibilities.

The final reason for migration presented in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is embodied by Bynum, a man who used to travel from place to place not because he wanted to run away from something or find new work, but because he wanted to find happiness and a deeper sense of meaning. In order to do so, he wandered, searching out something that would help him understand himself and the nature of his discontent. He articulates this sentiment to Loomis in the play's final act, saying, "Now, I used to travel all up and down this road and that…looking here and there. Searching. Just like you, Mr Loomis. I didn't know what I was searching for. The only thing I knew was something was keeping me dissatisfied. […] Then one day my daddy gave me a song."

The fact that Bynum "didn't know what [he] was searching for" is a perfect example of how the human tendency to desire abstract things mixes with historical circumstances to lead someone to travel the roads looking for some kind of existence that might provide him with empowerment or individuality. In this moment, Bynum acknowledges that "something was keeping [him] dissatisfied with life"—this is most likely because he was a black man trying to eke out a satisfying life in a country that built itself upon black oppression. But Bynum's discontent is also more individual than this; his dissatisfaction was, it seems, a true existential crisis. This is why finding his "song" helped him come to terms with himself and his life. Of course, this "song" is his defining element, the essence of his identity and the reason for his existence—or at least this is what he believes. Regardless of his song, though, Bynum's story suggests that perhaps all the other characters are also searching for this same thing: some essential element that will fill a void in their lives, a difficult thing to find, considering that this void is both the product of history *and* abstract existential yearnings. Whether the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* tell themselves they're looking for love or financial stability, they're most likely hoping to find something like Bynum's "song." Unfortunately, though, not everybody has a life-defining spiritual experience like Bynum's, and so the majority of the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* are condemned to go on wandering and wandering, hoping always for some bright new promise.

RACISM IN POST-SLAVERY AMERICA

Joe Turner's Come and Gone takes place in 1911, 48 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, which legally liberated all slaves in the Union. Even though the play's characters exist in a post-slavery America—and have for nearly 50 years—their lives are still influenced by the nation's racist past and present. In particular, Herald Loomis and Jeremy's everyday lives are directly impacted by the prejudiced and inhumane precedent set by slavery. By showcasing the tangible ways these characters continue to be affected by the legacy of slavery, Wilson suggests that acts of profound bigotry and dehumanization have long-lasting effects. As such, the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* continue to re-live the horrors of slavery on a daily basis, proving that just because this crime against humanity is over according to the law doesn't mean it has stopped harming the African Americans who inherited its traumas.

The characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* process the effects of racism in different ways. For instance, Jeremy acknowledges injustice without letting it break his spirits. A young black man at the mercy of white police officers and white employers, he frequently has to face racism and poor treatment, but he does so with an optimistic, cheerful attitude. When he first appears onstage, he has just been incarcerated for the night by the police because some officers wanted to confiscate the two dollars he and his friend earned from their employer. Despite this injustice, Jeremy manages to remain in good spirits, seemingly unwilling to let such virulent racism ruin his optimistic outlook on life. Wilson's initial note about him reads: "About twenty-five, he gives the impression that he has the world in his hand, that he can meet life's challenges head on. He smiles a lot." This disposition is at odds with the adversity with which he's forced to contend, but he keeps smiling nevertheless, an attitude that allows him to "meet life's challenges head on."

However, not everyone in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is able to deal with racism by defying structures of black oppression with a sense of unshakeable optimism. Indeed, people like Seth often choose to ignore bigotry altogether in order to lead stable lives. Whereas Jeremy's high-spirited willingness to reject racism interferes with his working life, Seth is more likely to acquiesce to the demands of white people for the sake of leading a prosperous life within the bounds of a racist society. When Jeremy explains that his white employers fired him because he refused to pay them fifty cents, Seth asks, "Boy, what kind of sense that make? What kind of sense it make to get fired from a job where you making eight dollars a week and all it cost you is fifty cents." In response, Jeremy says, "It didn't make no sense to me. I don't make but eight dollars. Why I got to give him fifty cents of it?" What's interesting about this exchange is that both men espouse different ideas about how to deal with the

realities of life in racist, post-slavery America. A pragmatic man who prizes stability, Seth is so preoccupied with making a living and attaining economic security that he thinks only in financial terms, ignoring the injustice of Jeremy's situation. This is why he asks "what kind of sense that make?", since, speaking strictly in terms of numbers, it *doesn't* make sense to sacrifice eight dollars for the sake of fifty cents. On the other hand, when Jeremy says, "It didn't make no sense to me," he reveals that he's looking at the situation not in terms of money, but in terms of principle: for him, it doesn't make sense to subject himself to unfair treatment just because he's black. Unfortunately, this determination to not acquiesce to racism leaves him jobless. Nonetheless, he retains his positive attitude, an exuberance for life that doesn't align with the harsh reality of the racist world in which he lives. In contrast, Seth's tendency to view unequal treatment as a fact of life allows him to create a comparatively stable life for himself. As such, Wilson presents two ways of dealing with racism in post-slavery America: either a person stands up for himself and thus shoulders the unfortunate consequences, or he accepts the limitations placed upon him and does what he can to succeed within them. And although these ways of responding to racism differ, they both require a person to compromise, illustrating how nobody in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* exists uninfluenced by America's history of racism.

Wilson further emphasizes the long-lasting effects of slavery by spotlighting Herald Loomis's experience as a free black man captured by Joe Turner, a white man who rounded up groups of black men and forced them to work for him for seven years. Loomis's time as one of these men completely derailed his life, splitting up his family and stripping him of his humanity. He explains to Seth and Bynum the circumstances of his capture, saying that he was snatched while preaching to a group of gamblers; "I stopped to preach to these fellows to see if maybe I could turn some of them from their sinning when Joe Turner, brother of the Governor of the great sovereign state of Tennessee, swooped down on us and grabbed everybody there." The fact that Joe Turner is the Governor of Tennessee's brother is significant because it illustrates the extent to which the American government still tacitly condones racial abuse. Joe Turner's affiliation with the government suggests that although the laws have changed since the time of slavery, even the government has hardly shifted away, in practice, from the systematic dehumanization of black people. Indeed, the nation has a legacy of racism that isn't easily dismantled, a legacy still bringing itself to bear on the characters of Wilson's play.

It's worth noting that even Selig—a supposedly friendly acquaintance of Seth and his boarders—operates within a tradition of prejudice and racism, since the only reason he's a "people finder" in the first place is because his ancestors made their name bringing Africans to America, and later tracking down escaped slaves for plantation owners. By presenting the clearly observable ways this history of racism still manifests itself in 1911, Wilson emphasizes the fact that all his characters have habituated themselves to a racist world order. This is in keeping with the play's name, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*—after all, Joe Turner is technically no longer in Loomis's life, but his presence lingers because of the terrible aftereffects of his actions. In turn, Loomis's inability to forget Joe Turner—along with Jeremy and Seth's respective attempts to deal with racism—suggests that America can't simply pick up and move on from its own racist history. This is further supported when Bynum sings an old blues song he learned in the South, the lyrics of which revolve around the phrase, "They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone." That this refrain has worked its way throughout the South is a testament to just how much the figure of Joe Turner has entered the national consciousness, suggesting that Herald Loomis isn't the only person still living a life shaped by the horrors of racism and its turbulent related history.

IDENTITY

Identity in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is portrayed as a combination of internal and external forces. Most of the considerations regarding this phenomenon are expressed by Wilson in his stage directions, or by Bynum, who has an abstract conception of what it means for somebody to truly honor his or her own personhood. According to him, everybody has a "song" inside—an idea that ultimately casts selfhood as something intrinsic and interior. At the same time, however, a person needs to not only tune into this "song," but also "harmonize" it with the outside world, as Wilson himself suggests in one of his character descriptions. Although the play never resorts to any straightforward or didactic explanations of this abstract concept, Wilson's treatment of selfhood suggests that, above all, a person's happiness and sense of "self-sufficiency" depend on finding ways to be true to him- or herself. To do this, people must acknowledge who they are, and then *be* that person even when the world makes it most difficult to do so. If a person can do this, Wilson implies, he or she will gain personal agency and empowerment. In other words, the process of forming a strong identity requires taking into account both internal dispositions and external factors, an endeavor that sometimes means carving out a place for oneself in the world.

Bynum speaks about having a "song" as if it's the equivalent to having an identity, establishing that a person's "song" defines who they are in the world. In Act One, he describes an encounter he had many years ago with the spirit of his dead father, when he first learned about what it means to have a song; "My daddy called me to him. Said he had been thinking about me and it grieved him to see me in the world carrying other people's songs and not having one of my own. Told me he was gonna show me how to find my song." The fact that

Bynum's father must show him "how to find [his] song" suggests that, although this internal force is definitive of a person's identity, it isn't immediately apparent. In other words, even though this "song" is seemingly so intrinsic to a person, it must be *found*. As such, the audience comes to understand that the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* are involved in a process of becoming themselves, developing their identities, and searching for their fundamental natures.

For many characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the process of becoming oneself is difficult not only because it requires them to tap into deeply entrenched personal dispositions, but also because it requires them to reconcile their senses of self with the external world. When Wilson describes Herald Loomis in a stage note, he asserts that he is "a man not driven 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." Wilson portrays Loomis's inability to "harmonize the forces that swirl around him" as a tragic flaw, one that keeps him from successfully finding "a world that speaks to something about himself." Nonetheless, Loomis tries to force himself into this unaccepting world, determined to "recreate" it into a place where he belongs. Considering that Loomis is a black man living in a deeply racist country, it's easy to understand his desire to change the world into one that doesn't reject him based on his skin color. He wants "a world that speaks to something about himself," and so he's tasked with making it himself—an empowering but challenging endeavor, rooted in a deeply human desire.

Unlike many of the other characters, Loomis understands that he must "harmonize" his internal "song" with the external world (though for the majority of the play he seems unable to do so). This is clear when he expresses his need to see Martha, his wife, for whom he's been searching since having been set free by Joe Turner. "I just wanna see her face so I can get me a starting place in the world," he tells Bynum and Seth. "The world got to start somewhere. That's what I been looking for. I been wandering a long time in somebody else's world. When I find my wife that be the making of my own." Loomis's desire to make the world his "own" is not only proactive, but denotes a certain sense of self-possession not shared by other characters. Although Bynum understands what Loomis is going through, Seth is unnerved by Loomis throughout the play, and constantly suspicious of him. This is because Seth himself takes an entirely different approach to harmonizing his inner "song" with the external world. Rather than trying to "recreate" the world, he acquiesces to it, ignoring racism and prejudice so that he can exist harmoniously in his home environment. Again, this is markedly different from the way Loomis goes about forming his own identity. When he finally sees his wife, he says, "Now that I see your face I can say my goodbye and make my own world."

When Loomis sees Martha's face, he understands that returning to live with her would mean falling into a life she has made in his absence, a life that doesn't take his existence into account. As such, he has decided to say his "goodbye" and move on with his life, determining to "make [his] own world." In other words, he comprehends that for his internal "song" to "harmonize" with the external world, he can't simply acquiesce to Martha's life, in which he no longer belongs. Instead, he must forge his own circumstances, creating a context with which he can "harmonize" his internal "song."

Wilson ultimately frames Loomis's approach to finding a stronger sense of self as admirable. Loomis symbolically chants at the end of the play: "I'm standing! I'm standing. My legs stood up! I'm standing now!" This, Wilson writes in a stage note, is the image of a man who has finally created a "*song of self-sufficiency*." As such, Wilson implies that recreating the world so that it accords with a person's inner song is a valiant feat of independence and self-assuredness, one that renders a person "free from any encumbrance."

SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is framed in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as something people turn to in order to find meaning in their lives. There are, of course, many different kinds of spirituality—a fact Wilson takes into account by portraying characters with wide-ranging belief systems. Bynum, for example, invests himself in old forms of African healing and mystical practices. Loomis's wife Martha, on the other hand, devotes herself to Christianity, believing that faith in the Lord gives purpose to life. Although these two conceptions of spirituality seem to differ greatly, they both speak to a desire to impose meaning and order on life, which might otherwise seem chaotic and meaningless.

Bynum is a "conjure man," a person who practices folk magic. He is presented as a shaman of sorts, apparently capable of "binding" people to one another spiritually. Doing this, he claims, is his life's calling—his "song." Even Wilson's note about Bynum suggests that his spiritual beliefs give him a sense of order and meaning; "A conjure man, or rootworker, he gives the impression of always being in control of everything. Nothing ever bothers him. He seems to be lost in a world of his own making and to swallow any adversity or interference with his grand design." That Bynum always feels "in control of everything" because of his practice as a conjure man illustrates the extent to which faith and spirituality can influence a person's conception of their own life. Indeed, Bynum feels empowered and comfortable in his life because he has invested himself in a "grand design." As such, Wilson implies that the idea of being part of something larger than oneself can help a person deal with adversity—even if this means being "lost in a world of [one's] own making."

The ways in which other characters participate—or don't

participate—in Bynum's "grand design" suggests that people often approach spirituality in a pragmatic way. In other words, they invest themselves in certain belief systems because they think doing so will help them live productive, fortunate, and meaningful lives. Bertha is a perfect example of somebody who approaches spirituality in this way, as she combines Christianity with Bynum's "conjure" rituals, supposedly doubling her chances of inviting good fortune. In the play's opening scene, Seth critiques her for participating in Bynum's folk magic, saying, "You around here sprinkling salt all over the place…got pennies lined up across the threshold…all that heebie jeebie stuff. I just put up with that 'cause of you. I don't pay that kind of stuff no mind. And you going down there to the church and wanna come home and sprinkle salt all over the place." By saying this, Seth points out that Bertha is mixing arguably contradictory belief systems, creating an amalgamation of superstition, Christianity, and folk magic. According to him, this is all nothing but foolishness, but Bertha disagrees. "It don't hurt none," she says. "I can't say if it help…but it don't hurt none." According to Bertha's outlook, then, a person doesn't need to commit to just one system of belief. Spirituality, it seems, can be amorphous and still inform a person's life, helping one achieve a sense of order, security, and meaning.

Martha, Herald Loomis's wife, invests herself in Christianity, a more commonly accepted form of spirituality than Bynum's "conjure" magic. For her, life is meaningless if a person doesn't believe in God, follow the Bible, and devote themselves to Jesus Christ. When she discovers that Herald has strayed from the church, she says, "You got to open up your heart and have faith, Herald. This world is just a trial for the next. Jesus offers you salvation." When she asserts that "this world is just a trial for the next," she suggests that the only point of life is to prepare for heaven. This is an extreme example of how spirituality can give meaning to life; for Martha, religious belief eclipses all other considerations. Whereas Bynum believes each person must find their *own* "song"— specific to that person—Martha upholds that there's just one calling for everybody, and people must "open up [their] heart[s]" to it. "You can't just be alive," she says to Herald. "Life don't mean nothing unless it got a meaning." For her, this "meaning" is to be found in religious devotion.

By showcasing how people organize their lives around spirituality, Wilson hints at the fact that humans often tend toward the fatalistic conception that certain things in life are predestined—part of a divine plan. Bynum, for example, has built his life around a spiritual practice that unites people who are "meant to be" together. The idea that two people are "meant to be" with one another implies a preordained narrative, something that ultimately superimposes a sense of order and significance upon a person's existence. Similarly, Martha's belief that everybody will pass into "the next" world when they die emphasizes life's unavoidable end, an outlook that—despite its morbidity—gives existence the feeling of guaranteed direction. As such, people can take a certain amount of comfort in the idea that they know what will happen to them, especially since they might otherwise think of the future as chaotic and unpredictable. Both Bynum and Martha's outlooks, then, suggest that certain events will transpire in the end no matter what. This idea, it seems, is soothing to the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* because it helps them believe that they exist in a "grand design," a notion that naturally adds meaning to their lives. In this way, Wilson presents spirituality as a deeply human practice of meaning-making—one that satisfies the natural desire to add order and value to existence.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE GUITAR

The fact that Jeremy's guitar enables him to make money wherever he goes signifies the play's interest in the relationship between music and travel. Indeed, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" is itself a title borrowed from an old blues song about the white tyrant Joe Turner (or Joe Turney), who used to capture black men and force them into labor. When somebody would ask why black men were missing from a town, people used to answer by saying, "Joe Turner's come and gone," a phrase that soon made its way into a blues refrain, becoming a song that traveled throughout the South and into the North. As such, Wilson uses music to discuss migration and transience, as evidenced by Bynum's belief that each person has their own "song" that they must *find*—this "song" (or the lack of it) is what drives people to the road, as even Bynum himself admits that as a young man he traveled from town to town because he couldn't find this "song." Jeremy's guitar, then, becomes a stand-in for his internal song, a way of compensating for the fact that he hasn't yet formed his spiritual identity. In keeping with this idea, Wilson notes, "He is a proficient guitar player, though his spirit has yet to be molded into song." Indeed, Jeremy seems to rely on his ability to make his own music, a skill that allows him to travel wherever he wants rather than staying in one spot and dealing with hardship. When he loses his job, he says, "I can get my guitar and always find me another place to stay." In this way, his guitar keeps him on the road, just as Bynum's pursuit for his internal "song" kept him traveling from place to place.

PIGEONS

Pigeons appear with surprising frequency in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* because they're

representative of the various ways in which freedom can be cut off or restricted. When Reuben first meets Zonia, he explains that when his friend Eugene was on his deathbed, he asked that Reuben set his pigeons free. Because these pigeons are all that's left to remind him of Eugene, though, Reuben can't bear to let them go. As such, he sells them everyday to Bynum, who uses them in his spiritualistic rituals. Although Reuben doesn't know what exactly Bynum does with the birds, Wilson makes sure the audience knows that the old conjure man kills them, as Seth mentions at the beginning of the play when he says to Bertha, "He done killed that pigeon and now he's putting its blood in that little cup." Just before the play's final scene, the ghost of Seth's mother appears and orders Reuben to set Eugene's pigeons free. That this occurs directly before Herald Loomis finally finds his "song of self-sufficiency"—thereby liberating himself from the shackles of his own history—shows that pigeons are emblematic of the play's interest in freedom and oppression. In the same way that Herald has to see Martha's face so that he can say "goodbye" to her and thus begin to create his new life as a free man, Reuben must bring himself to set Eugene's pigeons free, thereby releasing himself from the painful memory of his friend's death.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* published in 1988.

The Play Quotes

From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow, crooked cobbles and the 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.

Related Themes:

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Page Number: 0

Explanation and Analysis

August Wilson provides this note in a section entitled "The Play," which appears before the beginning of the work's first scene. In doing so, he provides a cultural backdrop for the entire play, one that contextualizes his characters' wayward lives and their tendencies toward migration and transience. Indeed, he historically situates his characters, noting that they are the "sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves" and that they're wandering out of the "deep and the near South." When he says that they arrive with "their heart kicking in their chest," he suggests that this group of people is something of a cohesive whole, a notion implied by his grammatical choice to apply the plural pronoun "their" to the singular noun "heart," as if all of these "sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves" have the *same* heart. As such, Wilson implies that the history of slavery these people are trying to escape is itself a unifying experience, something that characterizes and binds them together. In this way, readers come to understand that although the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* may struggle with their own specific troubles, they're all essentially striving for the same thing: "a way of bludgeoning and shaping [...] themselves into a new identity as free men."

Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and dispersement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy.

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wilson continues his description of the "sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves," who are making their way out of the South and into the North. This journey, he suggests here, brings them to unfamiliar places, and although they're Americans, they find themselves "foreigners in a strange land." The "baggage" they carry can be understood as the burden of slavery and a racist national history. Indeed, this history has created a "long line of separation" between family members and lovers, a fact that speaks directly to the play's interest in characters trying to track down lost loved ones. Once again, then, history sets a precedent for the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and*

Gone—just as slavery has broken up families and sent people wandering into "strange land[s]," characters like Herald Loomis move through unknown towns in search of long lost lovers. Wilson's use of the word "dispersement" feels especially appropriate in this moment, as the word itself seems to speak to the play's interest in how African Americans have been scattered throughout the nation in the wake of slavery.

> SETH: […] All that old mumbo jumbo nonsense. I don't know why I put up with it.

BERTHA: You don't say nothing when he bless the house.

SETH: I just go along with that 'cause of you. You around here sprinkling salt all over the place…got pennies lined up across the threshold…all that heebie jeebie stuff. I just put up with that 'cause of you. I don't pay that kind of stuff no mind. And you going down there to the church and wanna come come [sic] home and sprinkle salt all over the place.

BERTHA: It don't hurt none. I can't say if it help…but it don't hurt none.

Related Characters: Bertha Holly, Seth Holly (speaker), Bynum Walker

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Seth and Bertha have this conversation in the kitchen at the beginning of the play while watching Bynum enact a folk magic ritual outside the window. This is the first moment in which Seth expresses his strong skepticism of superstition and spirituality in general, calling it "old mumbo jumbo nonsense." When he says that he doesn't know why he puts up with this sort of behavior, Wilson signals to the audience that Seth is a no-nonsense kind of person, thereby foreshadowing his vehement dislike of Herald Loomis, whom Seth thinks brings chaos and unsavoriness into his home. What's interesting, though, is what Bertha points out about Seth's hypocritical outlook regarding spirituality and look. When she says, "You don't say nothing when he bless the house," she reveals that Seth is perhaps not as staunchly against the idea that luck and fortune are things worth indulging. Of course, he refutes this by saying that he only "put[s] up with it" because Bertha herself buys into such ideas. When he says this, the audience learns that Bertha is a woman comfortable with mixing belief systems that other people might view as naturally opposed to one another—after all, she goes to church and acts like a Christian, but she also has no problem entertaining Bynum's folk magic, thereby technically sinning according to Christian doctrine. Even when Seth accuses her of this over-flexibility, though, she doesn't seem to mind, simply justifying that doubling down on spirituality most likely doesn't "hurt" anything, though she's also willing to admit that it might not "help" anything, either. In a play populated characters who cling so tightly to their systems of belief—orienting their entire identities around the ways in which they conceptualize spirituality—this is a strikingly open-minded worldview.

> Jeremy just young. He don't know what he getting into. That gal don't mean him no good. She's just using him to keep from being by herself. That's the worst use of a man you can have. You ought to be glad to wash him out of your hair. I done seen all kind of men. I done seen them come and go through here. Jeremy ain't had enough to him for you. You need a man who's got some understanding and who willing to work with that understanding to come to the best he can. You got your time coming. You just tries too hard and can't understand why it don't work for you. Trying to figure it out don't do nothing but give you a troubled mind. Don't no man want a woman with a troubled mind.

You get all that trouble off your mind and just when it look like you ain't never gonna find what you want […] you look up and it's standing right there. That's how I met my Seth. You gonna look up one day and find everything you want standing right in front of you.

Related Characters: Bertha Holly (speaker), Molly Cunningham, Jeremy Furlow, Mattie Campbell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Bertha says this to Mattie Campbell after Jeremy runs away with Molly Cunningham, leaving Mattie alone after she has just moved in with him. In the wake of this unfortunate situation, Mattie has once again been talking to Bynum, who has given her a good luck charm and who frequently asks

her if she's keeping it under her pillow. As somebody who's flexible when it comes to spirituality, Bertha advises Mattie to not dwell on "trying to figure" out her life. As such, she tries to disabuse Mattie of Bynum's influence, suggesting that the young woman pay no heed to the old man's strict rituals. She also tells Mattie to forget about Jeremy, who clearly never intended to stick around with her anyway.

When she says Mattie will find what she wants once she stops looking for it and trying to make it happen, Bertha challenges the ways that other characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* view spirituality. Indeed, while people like Bynum see spirituality as a way of effecting change and inviting good fortune, Bertha merely sees it as something that *might* help a person's life. As such, she's comfortable letting things unravel naturally, a mentality that celebrates the wonderful nature of chance while simultaneously believing that what's meant to be will inevitably take place.

Act One: Scene One Quotes

❝ 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. Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish-acting niggers. 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. They don't know the white fellows looking too. White fellows coming from all over the world. White fellow come over and in six months got more than what I got. But these niggers keep on coming. Walking…riding…carrying their Bibles. That boy done carried a guitar all the way from North Carolina. What he gonna find out? What he gonna do with that guitar? This the city.

Related Characters: Seth Holly (speaker), Jeremy Furlow, Bynum Walker

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Seth says this to Bynum in a conversation about Jeremy, who he's just learned got thrown in jail the previous night. Seth is upset to hear this news because he wants his residents to uphold a certain public image so as not to disgrace his household. When he says that the black people traveling out of the South arrive with an "old backward country style of living," he speaks disparagingly about black migrants, blaming them for acting "ignorant" and thus making it "hard[er]" for people like himself to prosper. When he says, "it's hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting," he acknowledges that it's difficult for a black person to prosper in America, since the country is still dominated by white people and racist power structures. As such, people like Seth—who are relatively successful—resent anybody they think might make it even more difficult for black people to flourish. In this way, the audience begins to see how racism refracts itself throughout the culture, as Seth essentially turns the white gaze on other black people and reduces them to fools with simple manners and an "old backward country style of living." This negative conception of Southern black people also applies to the migratory lifestyles they lead, as Seth critiques people like Jeremy for "drop[ping] everything" and "head[ing] North" at the first mention of freedom and economic opportunity. Of course, what Seth fails to take into account is that most of these migrant workers aren't "drop[ping] everything" when they travel northward because they don't *have* anything to drop in the first place. Nonetheless, he's so focused on how the influx of Southern blacks in Pittsburgh might negatively influence his own life and the respectable image he's tried to build up that he doesn't bother to fully consider why these migratory workers have left the South to begin with.

❝ My daddy called me to him. Said he had been thinking about me and it grieved him to see me in the world carrying other people's songs and not having one of my own. Told me he was gonna show me how to find my song. Then he carried me further into this big place until we come to this ocean. Then he showed me something 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. I asked him about the shiny man and he told me he was the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way. Said there was lots of shiny men and if I ever saw one again before I died then I would know that my song had been accepted and worked its full power in the world and I could lay down and die a happy man. A man who done left his mark on life. On the way people cling to each other out of the truth they find in themselves. Then he showed me how to get back to the road.

Related Characters: Bynum Walker (speaker), Rutherford Selig

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Bynum says this to Rutherford Selig while telling the traveling salesman his story about encountering the "shiny man," whom he has hired Selig to find. This is an important moment in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* because Bynum introduces the idea that each person has a "song," and that everybody must find this "song" for themselves. Interestingly enough, he tells Selig that he doesn't have "words" to actually communicate what he saw in this "big place." This is strange, considering that Bynum originally set out to tell Selig the Secret of Life, and yet just when he finally reaches the point in his story at which he might actually impart some wisdom, he shies away. The fact that he backs away from straightforwardly explaining the Secret of Life is telling, as it suggests that such a vast concept is more about self-discovery than anything else. This is why Bynum says, "But if you stand to witness it, you done seen something there." These kinds of vague abstractions run throughout the play, and Wilson often speaks figuratively rather than didactically explaining conceptions of spirituality and identity. Suffice it to say that in this moment, Bynum highlights the fact that each person needs to act on their own behalf, finding a "song" and pulling it out of themselves in order to make a "mark on life."

> The roots is a powerful thing. I can fix it so one day he'll walk out his front door…won't be thinking of nothing. He won't know what it is. All he knows is that a powerful dissatisfaction done set in his bones and can't nothing he do make him feel satisfied. He'll set his foot down on the road and the wind in the trees be talking to him and everywhere he step on the road, that road'll give back your name and something will pull him right up to your doorstep. Now, I can do that. I can take my roots and fix that easy. But maybe he ain't supposed to come back. And if he ain't supposed to come back…then he'll be in your bed one morning and it'll come up on him that he's in the wrong place. That he's lost outside of time from his place that he's supposed to be in. Then both of you be lost and trapped outside of life and ain't no way for you to get back into it. 'Cause you lost from yourselves and where the places come together, where you're supposed to be alive, your heart kicking in your chest with a song worth singing.

Related Characters: Bynum Walker (speaker), Jack Carper, Mattie Campbell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Bynum delivers this short monologue in a conversation with Mattie Campbell, in which Mattie has just asked him to use root magic to make her ex-lover, Jack Carper, return to her. It's worth noting the way he explains how he *could* make Jack Carper come back, saying that he could make the young man feel a "powerful dissatisfaction" and that this "dissatisfaction" would eventually draw him to the "road," which he would travel until finally finding Mattie again. This is an important idea because it offers one reason why so many of the people in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* lead such transient lives: they are spurred by a sense of restless "dissatisfaction" that goes down to their very identity or soul. Indeed, even Bynum himself later tells Herald that he used to travel from town to town without knowing what he was searching for, knowing only that he wasn't satisfied with life. Perhaps because of this experience, Bynum knows that this lifestyle doesn't lead to happiness. Rather, it can lead to somebody feeling "trapped outside of life" with no way to "get back into it" because he or she is "lost." The solution, according to Bynum, is to find one's true identity and purpose, or "song"—and one that is "worth singing," which implies that the world will be listening.

Also important to note is that Bynum's language here reflects exactly Wilson's introduction to the play's setting. In describing the Southern blacks migrating to the North, Wilson says, "their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing." This is then a crucial idea in the work, as Bynum delivers a kind of thesis statement on the play's themes of transience, identity, and spirituality, while connecting it here to Mattie's personal situation.

I can't promise anything but 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. That wasn't no easy job either. Sometimes the winds would blow so hard you'd think the hand of God was set against the sails. But it set him well in pay and he settled in this new land and found him a wife of good Christian charity with a mind for kids and the like and well…here I am, Rutherford Selig. You're in good hands, mister. Me and my daddy have found plenty Nigras. My daddy, rest his soul, used to find runaway slaves for the plantation bosses. He was the best there was at it. […] Had him a reputation stretched clean across the country. After Abraham Lincoln give you all Nigras your freedom papers and with you all looking all over for each other…we started finding Nigras for Nigras. Of course, it don't pay as much. But the People Finding business ain't so bad.

Related Characters: Rutherford Selig (speaker), Herald Loomis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Selig says this to Herald Loomis after Herald pays him to find his wife, Martha. In doing so, he reveals the fraught familial history that has contributed to his occupation as a "people finder." Indeed, it becomes overwhelmingly apparent that Selig's family has long prospered by exploiting the slave trade. When Selig says that bringing Africans to America allowed his great grandfather to buy "new land" and marry "a wife of good Christian charity with a mind for kids and the like," he very straightforwardly lists the tangible ways in which he benefited from ruining the lives of black people (and the mention of "good Christian charity" is thus brutally ironic in context). Similarly, when Selig boasts that his own father had "a reputation stretched clean across the country" for finding "runaway slaves for the plantation bosses," he demonstrates a tone-deaf insensitivity, considering that he's speaking to a black man who is clearly still feeling the long-lasting pains of slavery and racism. As such, Wilson demonstrates once again that the nation's ugly past still brings itself to bear on the present moment, as this white "people finder" seemingly owes everything he has—including his occupation—to the fact that his white family established itself by leveraging the slave trade.

BYNUM: What you waiting on, Herald Loomis?

LOOMIS: I'm waiting on the breath to get into my body. I can feel it. I'm starting to breathe again.

BYNUM: The breath coming into you, Herald Loomis. What you gonna do now?

LOOMIS: The wind's blowing the breath into my body. I can feel it. I'm starting to breathe again.

BYNUM: What you gonna do, Herald Loomis?

LOOMIS: I'm gonna stand up. I got to stand up. I can't lay here no more. All the breath coming into my body and I got to stand up.

BYNUM: Everybody's standing up at the same time.

LOOMIS: The ground's starting to shake. There's a great shaking. The world's busting half in two. The sky's splitting open. I got to stand up.
(LOOMIS *attempts to stand up.*)
My legs…my legs won't stand up!

Related Characters: Herald Loomis, Bynum Walker (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Bynum and Herald Loomis have this conversation in the parlor just after Herald has dashed in and yelled at the residents to stop singing about the Holy Ghost. Loomis then collapses to the floor and enters a vision, which Bynum helps him describe. In this vision, Herald sees a collection of bones rise up over a vast ocean and walk on the water before toppling into a wave and falling all over the shoreline, where he himself lies. Of course, this conversation is extremely abstract and admittedly hard to follow, but it is ultimately in line with Wilson's highly stylized and figurative treatment of spirituality and identity. Indeed, when Loomis says that he's "waiting on the breath to get into [his] body," the audience can easily assume that this is a metaphorical statement, in which the "breath" Herald's waiting for symbolizes some kind of agency or power. This is exactly what Bynum seeks to give Loomis by telling him that the "breath" is indeed "coming into [him]," thereby uplifting the man's spirits and coaxing him along. This ultimately leads

Herald to declare that he's going to "stand up" because he can't "lay here no more." Emboldened by the fact that he can "feel" the breath coming back into his body, he decides to stand. Unfortunately, though, he's unable to do so, which is itself symbolic of the fact that he—a wearied man trying desperately to put his life back together after having been essentially enslaved for seven years—can't get a foothold in the racist world in which he lives.

> JEREMY: It didn't make no sense to me. I don't make but eight dollars. Why I got to give him fifty cents of it? He go around to all the colored and he got ten dollars extra. That's more than I make for a whole week.
>
> SETH: I see you gonna learn the hard way. You just looking at the facts of it. See, right now, without the job, you ain't got nothing. What you gonna do when you can't keep a roof over your head? Right now, come Saturday, unless you come up with another two dollars, you gonna be out there in the streets. Down up under one of them bridges trying to put some food in your belly and wishing you had given that fellow that fifty cents.
>
> JEREMY: Don't make me no difference. There's 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.

Related Characters: Seth Holly, Jeremy Furlow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation between Jeremy and Seth that takes place after Jeremy has been fired from his job as a bridge worker. He has just explained to Seth that his white boss went around to all the black workers and demanded that they pay fifty cents in order to keep their jobs, so he—Jeremy—refused and was fired as a result. What's noteworthy about this conversation is the different ways Seth and Jeremy view racism and its influence on economic prosperity or stability. To Jeremy, it makes "no sense" to have to *pay* to keep a job, especially when he only makes eight dollars per week. As such, he's willing to stand up for himself, speaking up against his racist employer even though he knows it will mean losing his job. Seth, on the other hand, is more concerned with maintaining financial stability, so willingly leaving a job is inconceivable to him, regardless of whether or not keeping that job means putting up with racism. When he says, "You just looking at the facts of it," he suggests that Jeremy isn't looking at the big picture. Although he never fully articulates this idea, he seems in this moment to be hinting that the most effective way to combat racism is to establish oneself financially and work *within* white-dominated power structures. By prospering even under unaccommodating circumstances, somebody like Seth ultimately can try to undermine the racist structures working against him. Of course, this means bearing the brunt of everyday bigotry. In this way, Wilson shows that racism exacts a toll on a person no matter how he chooses to handle it, suggesting that a black man unfortunately finds himself all too frequently having to compromise either his dignity or his livelihood.

> Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is. Forget how he's supposed to mark down life. Now, I used to travel all up and down this road and that…looking here and there. Searching. Just like you, Mr. Loomis. I didn't know what I was searching for. The only thing I knew was something was keeping me dissatisfied. Something wasn't making my heart smooth and easy. Then one day my daddy gave me a song. That song had a weight to it that was hard to handle. That song was hard to carry. I fought against it. Didn't want to accept that song. I tried to find my daddy to give him back the song. But I found out it wasn't his song. It was my song. It had come from way deep inside me. I looked long back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song. I was making it up out of myself. And that song helped me on the road.

Related Characters: Bynum Walker (speaker), Joe Turner, Herald Loomis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Bynum says this to Herald Loomis after Loomis asks him how he knows so much about him. Bynum claims he can just tell by looking at Loomis that he's "a man who done forgot his song," something Bynum thinks is utterly significant to a person's wellbeing, since—according to his own life story—anybody who hasn't found his "song" is condemned to "travel all up and down this road and that…looking here

and there. Searching." When Bynum says that "the only thing [he] knew was something was keeping [him] dissatisfied," he recalls his earlier remark to Mattie that he could make Jack Carper return to her by making the man feel a deep sense of dissatisfaction, one that would put him on the road in search of a cure. As such, he reinforces the notion that transience is often spurred by a sense of discontentment and unfulfillment, especially when this discontentment is abstract and vague. Indeed, it seems that it's not so easy for a person to find his "song," considering that even Bynum "fought against it" after his father gave it to him. Coming to terms with a song, it seems, requires looking "long back in memory," an idea suggesting that a person's identity is intertwined with his personal history. And because Herald's history is marked by his terrible experience of having been captured by Joe Turner, it's likely that the process of finding his own song will require him to confront painful memories, making the song itself "hard to carry."

(LOOMIS *slashes himself across the chest. He rubs the blood over his face and comes to a realization.*)
I'm standing! I'm standing. My legs stood up! I'm standing now! (*Having found his song, the song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh, having accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world, he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions.*)

Related Characters: Herald Loomis (speaker), Martha Loomis (Martha Pentecost)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

This passage combines Wilson's final stage notes with Herald Loomis's last words in the play. When Herald "slashes himself across the chest," he does so as a way of responding to Martha's insistence that Jesus bled for him, a statement intended to convince her husband to return to religion and embrace Jesus once again as his savior. Despite her efforts, Herald refuses to resume his religious life because he now sees Christianity as yet another force that has oppressed him and kept him from achieving a sense of "self-sufficiency." As such, he cuts himself, thereby bleeding for himself rather than accepting the idea that Jesus has bled *for* him. This is, of course, an attempt to attain his "song of self-sufficiency," and once he does this, he shouts, "I'm standing!" This line harkens back to the vision he had in the parlor, when Bynum knelt over him and helped him describe watching a mass of bones assemble themselves into people and make their way toward a road while Herald himself remained unable to stand. Now that he is "free from any encumbrance," though, he can finally haul himself up and "stand" on his own two feet, thereby "free[ing] himself" from the bonds both he and others have placed on him throughout his entire life.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE PLAY

Wilson prefaces the play's first scene with a brief note regarding the atmosphere of Pittsburgh in 1911. He notes that all over the city men are working on bridges, roads, and tunnels, and new houses are appearing with great rapidity. "From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city," he writes, going on to call these migrants "isolated" and "cut off from memory." They arrive in the city feeling as if their hearts are "kicking in their chest[s] with a song worth singing," and they carry Bibles and **guitars** with them. They're characterized by a "fresh hope" and a desire to sculpt "the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth."

Wilson's short description of the play's setting encapsulates the theme of transience that runs throughout the subsequent scenes. The industrialization of travel represented by the bridges, roads, and tunnels that are being installed in the city shows just how widespread migration has become in the years after slavery, when African Americans are traveling northward for the first time. Of course, the effects of this mass migration also bring themselves to bear on the travelers themselves, who find themselves estranged from everything they've known in the South, "isolated" and unable to form a sense of continuity between their past lives—as slaves or the children of slaves—and as relatively independent, self-sufficient workers in the North. As such, they're "cut off from memory" while also trying to shape themselves so that they can assume "new identit[ies] as free men." Furthermore, Wilson foregrounds the play's interest in identity and spirituality by referencing the "song worth singing" "kicking in" the chests of the migrants, since the idea that a person has a "song" he or she must identify in order to establish an identity and a sense of spirituality is prominent throughout the play.

ACT ONE: SCENE ONE

Bertha Holly prepares breakfast in the kitchen of her boarding house while her husband, Seth, looks out the window. He is watching Bynum, a "rootworker" or "conjure man" who lives in the boarding house. Bynum is currently outside in the garden performing a spiritualistic ritual with **pigeons**, a fact that troubles Seth. "All that old mumbo jumbo nonsense," he says. "I don't know why I put up with it." Trying to get him to lighten up, his wife points out that he himself doesn't mind when Bynum uses that "mumbo jumbo nonsense" to bless the house. Seth contests this by saying he only entertains such practices because of Bertha, who doesn't mind mixing folk magic with Christianity. Unperturbed, Bertha merely says, "It don't hurt none. I can't say if it help…but it don't hurt none."

In this opening scene, conflicting ideas about spirituality quickly emerge, and it becomes clear that Seth sees himself as a pragmatic man who doesn't feel the need to seek meaning or purpose by way of spirituality. Indeed, he merely "put[s] up with" rituals and superstitions. Bertha, on the other hand, is flexible in her approach to faith. For her, mixing Christianity with folk magic doesn't diminish either one, but rather doubles her chances of benefitting from either practice. When she says that she doesn't know if it helps but is confident these measures don't "hurt," she casts spirituality in a rather utilitarian manner, portraying it as something that can be used to help a person.

Seth continues watching Bynum, worried the old man is about to drink pigeon blood, though Bertha assures her husband that this isn't the case. To take his mind off such matters, she asks him about work, and Seth tells her he wants to teach five men to make pots and pans so he can increase his output, though he's been unable to convince any white men to give him a loan to do this. Seth and Bertha then talk about Jeremy, a young tenant who apparently was jailed for being drunk the previous night. "You know I don't put up with that," Seth says. As he does so, Bynum comes inside, and Wilson provides a quick note: "Nothing ever bothers him. He seems to be lost in a world of his own making and to swallow any adversity or interference with his grand design."

When Wilson writes that Bynum gives the impression that "nothing ever bothers him" because he's "lost in a world of his own making," he illustrates how much a strong sense of spirituality can affect the way a person carries himself in the world. Indeed, Bynum's entire identity is apparently oriented around his strong conviction that he is part of a "grand design," a belief that ultimately allows him to "swallow any adversity." As such, spirituality—for Bynum, at least—becomes a way of coping with an otherwise difficult and unpredictable world.

Bynum says Seth looks sick, but Seth brushes him off, saying even if he *were* sick, he wouldn't let Bynum heal him. When Bynum asks after Jeremy, Seth rants about how he won't put up with irresponsible behavior in his house. Bynum remarks that Jeremy's a good kid who merely has a bit of "country" in him that will eventually fade, but Seth holds forth, saying, "These niggers coming up here with that old backward country style of living… Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish-acting niggers." He upholds that young African Americans "drop everything" at the first mention of work, travelling northward with too much optimism about their employment prospects. "They don't know the white fellows looking too. […] White fellow come over and in six months got more than what I got."

Seth reveals himself in this moment as deeply cynical of the optimism of black migrant workers traveling northward out of the South. To him, the idea of "drop[ping] everything" to explore relatively unknown employment prospects is foolish, especially since white people are also looking for work. This is an important point, since Seth brings up the very real fact that, although slavery has ended, the nation is still a long way from racial equality. Indeed, he suggests that it's naïve for a black person to think they will be able to find good work just because there are jobs to be filled—what this mindset fails to take into account, Seth shows, is the racism still running throughout the country and dominating the workforce.

Rutherford Selig, a white man and traveling salesman, knocks on the door. Once he's inside, Bynum greets him, saying, "If it ain't Rutherford Selig…the People Finder himself." Bynum then asks Selig if he has found the "shiny man" he hired him to track down. Ignoring him for the moment, Selig gives Seth sheet metal, and the two men make a deal that Seth will buy the material and use it to make dustpans, which Selig will buy back the following Saturday, setting off again to sell the dustpans in the neighboring towns. After the two men haggle, Bynum interjects, asking Selig where he has traveled this past week and if he's found anybody. When he asks why Selig hasn't found his "shiny man," Selig says, "The only shiny man I saw was the Nigras working on the road gang with the sweat glistening on them."

Despite Seth's pessimism regarding employment opportunities in Northern cities, he himself seems to have procured a relatively stable and lucrative financial position, in which he can make deals with a white man. A black craftsman, he has found a way to sell his wares without having to go door-to-door himself; having Selig sell the products is beneficial to Seth, since Selig is white. After all, if Seth were the one going door-to-door, he'd be sure to make fewer sales due racial prejudice. In this way, Wilson shows that Seth has found a creative way to exist in an environment that might otherwise prove unaccommodating to a black man. This is perhaps why Seth is so discouraging of other African Americans traveling north to find jobs: he knows his own success story is rare.

Bynum tells Selig about how he first met the shiny man, explaining that he came upon him while walking on a road in Johnston—this man was lost and asked Bynum for directions and some food, which Bynum gave him. The man then told Bynum to follow him because he wanted to show him something, so Bynum walked with him until he remembered that the man was supposedly unfamiliar with the road. When he pointed this out, the man said he had a voice inside pointing him in the right direction. If Bynum followed, he said, he'd show him the Secret of Life. At this point Seth interrupts, pointing out that Selig only gave him six sheets of metal instead of eight, the number Selig originally mentioned. "Wait a minute, Seth," Selig says. "Bynum's telling me about the secret of life."

Although it was perhaps an accident, the fact that Selig gave Seth fewer sheets of metal than he'd originally indicated is significant, since it suggests that Selig is perhaps not entirely honest. Of course, it would be in keeping with the racism still plaguing the country if Selig were trying to cheat Seth, despite the fact that he and Seth seem to have a cordial and smooth working relationship. As such, Wilson suggests that even black entrepreneurs who have found stability and good positions have to remain alert and on their guard when it comes to making transactions with white people.

In Bynum's story, he and this stranger approach a bend in the road, and the man tells him to hold out his hands. Bynum obliges, and the stranger rubs blood onto his palms, instructing him to smear it over his body as a way of cleaning himself. After Bynum does so, they turn the corner, and suddenly everything is "bigger than life." Turning to look at his guide, Bynum sees light pouring out of the stranger, making him shine blindingly "like new money" until he vanishes altogether, leaving Bynum alone. For some time, Bynum rambles through this strange place before coming upon the spirit of his dead father, who tells him he's been thinking about him and that it makes him sad to see that Bynum has been "carrying other people's songs and not having one of [his] own."

In conjunction with the idea that there is a "secret of life" in the first place, the notion that a person can have a "song" of his "own" suggests a certain profound and fundamental conception of spirituality, one in which life and existence has a specific meaning (or a specific quality, as would be the case with a person's "song"). When it comes to Bynum not having a song of his "own," Wilson implies that each person has a defining spiritual element within themselves and that it's their job to find or recognize it.

Bynum's father helps him find his "song," carrying him into an ocean and showing him something that Bynum "ain't got words to tell" to Selig. For a while, Bynum stays and learns his "song," eventually asking his father about the shiny man, who his father explains was "the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way." If Bynum ever sees another shiny man, his father says, he'll know that his "song [has] been accepted and worked its full power in the world," at which point he can lie down and die happily, knowing he's "left his mark on life." When Bynum finally makes his way back to the road, he has learned his "song," which—he explains to Selig—is the Binding Song, meaning he can bind people together. "I choose that song because that's what I seen most when I was traveling…people walking away and leaving one another."

Wilson never straightforwardly explains what it means to have a "song," but it's clear in this moment that Bynum conceives of his "song" as his defining element, something that gives purpose to his entire existence. This conception aligns with Wilson's earlier description of Bynum, in which he says that Bynum exists in a world of his "own making," one that places him in a "grand design." This "grand design," apparently, is to "bind" people, a fact that once again brings the idea of migration to the forefront of the play. Indeed, Bynum seems to have lived a life of transience himself, and he knows that people often wander away from one another, whether because they are driven to it or because they feel the pull of the open road and the possibilities it presents. The fact that he wants to reunite people, though, suggests that this kind of transience, this constant hope to find newer, better lives, is not always for the best.

Bynum tells Selig that he's been "binding people ever since" learning his "song," which is why people call him Bynum. "Well, how is that the Secret of Life?" Selig asks, but Bynum tells him he has to figure it out for himself. At this point, Selig shifts his attention back to his transaction with Seth, and the two men arrange for Selig to return the following week to retrieve the dustpans. Shortly after Selig leaves, Jeremy comes into the kitchen, sitting down to eat a large breakfast after a long night in jail. Wilson notes that Jeremy "gives the impression that he has the world in his hand, that he can meet life's challenges head on. He smiles a lot. He is a proficient **guitar** player, though his spirit has yet to be molded into song."

Bynum's assertion that Selig has to figure out the secret of life for himself is somewhat comedic, since he originally started telling his story under the pretense of telling his listener that very same secret. Nonetheless, this idea is very much in keeping with Bynum's notion that each person must find their own "song"—no two songs will be the same, and so the secret of life will inevitably vary from person to person, too. What's interesting about this notion is that it frames spirituality not as something that gives a person just one way of interpreting the world—as is often the case with standard religions—but something that can enable a person to embrace the ever-shifting, malleable nature of life and existence.

Seth chastises Jeremy for getting arrested, telling him he won't stand for this kind of behavior under his roof. Defending himself, Jeremy explains that he wasn't even drunk when the police officers arrested him. In fact, he and his friend had just bought a bottle of liquor with the money they earned working on a new bridge when, before they could even open the bottle, the police officers came upon them and took them into custody. They did so, Jeremy says, so that they could take the money and use it for themselves. Nonetheless, Seth merely says, "I don't go for all that kind of carrying on."

Jeremy's story is a straightforward and blatant example of the ways in which young African Americans are still feeling the effects of the racism that has been ingrained in American culture. Nonetheless, Seth retains his strict mentality, showing Jeremy no sympathy at all, thereby further victimizing the young man in order to supposedly retain an air of respectability about his house—essentially expecting Jeremy to work around white racism, rather than holding whites accountable for the racism itself.

A knock sounds on the door, and a wearied looking man and his daughter appear in the kitchen. The man's name is Herald Loomis, and he asks to rent a room from Seth. Wilson's stage note describes Loomis as "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." With Seth, Herald strikes a deal in which he and his daughter can stay in the boarding house for the week if he pays $2.50 and his daughter, Zonia, helps with the cooking and cleaning.

Wilson's description of Herald once again calls upon the idea of a person's internal "song," though now he adds a new element, considering the ways in which this "song" interacts with the external world. Indeed, he says that Loomis is unable to "harmonize the forces that swirl around him," indicating that the world is for some reason unwilling to accept the man's identity (his "song"). Because of this, Loomis has to go out of his way to "recreate the world" around him so that it can accommodate him. This idea is at once sociological and existential—related to both the racist society Herald must find his way in and his most innate conception of himself as a human being existing in the world.

Bynum asks Herald where he and Zonia are coming from, and Herald says, "Come from all over. Whicheverway the road take us that's the way we go." He goes on to reveal that he's looking for a woman named Martha Loomis—his wife. Seth says he knows several Marthas, but nobody with the last name Loomis, and Bynum suggests that Herald speak to Selig the following Saturday, telling him that the white man is a "first-class People Finder." When Seth goes upstairs with Herald and Zonia to get them settled in, Bynum asks Jeremy what he's going to do that night, but Jeremy says he's too nervous to go out after the way he was treated the previous night. Ignoring this, Bynum tells Jeremy to take his **guitar** and go down to a nearby "gambling place," where they hold guitar-playing competitions.

When Herald says he and Zonia have been traveling in any direction the road takes them, Wilson once again demonstrates just how much transience has worked its way into the lives of young African Americans in the decades following slavery. Loomis, though, isn't looking for employment like the migrants Seth references in his earlier diatribe about travel and opportunity. Indeed, he's searching for his wife, a more tangible reason to travel, though it's rather strange to follow "whicheverway the road" goes as a way of tracking somebody down. On another note, Jeremy's hesitancy to leave the house because of his negative experience with the police the previous night illustrates the very tangible ways racism can impact a person's life.

Seth reenters the kitchen and says he thinks there's something off about Herald. "I take him up there and try to talk to him and he ain't for no talking…Say he been traveling…coming over from Ohio. Say he a deacon in the church. Say he looking for Martha Pentecost. Talking about that's his wife." Although Herald claims to be looking for a Martha Loomis, Seth is sure he's referring to Martha Pentecost, a woman Seth knows who apparently looks just like Zonia. When Bertha asks if he told Herald he knows where his wife is, Seth says he didn't, justifying his decision by remarking, "The way that fellow look I wasn't gonna tell him nothing. I don't know what he looking for her for." As they talk about her father, Zonia comes into the kitchen and Bynum shows her the door to the backyard.

Seth again proves himself a judgmental person, someone quick to jump to conclusions about others. This mentality is perhaps the result of his relative success as a black man trying to make a stable living in a racist society; having established himself as a reliable businessman, he's obsessed with making sure his house is seen as respectable (assuming a white audience). As such, he's prone to making snap judgments about other people, especially if they seem even slightly out of step with what he believes is normal. What's more, Herald Loomis represents the kind of black man Seth resents: a migrant wandering aimlessly out of the South.

A young woman named Mattie Campbell comes to the boarding house and asks to speak with Bynum. Sitting in the kitchen, she asks him if he can "fix things" the way people say he can, inquiring whether or not he can make her lover return to her. Bynum says he can indeed work his magic so that her lover, Jack Carper, can't sleep until he sees her face, but that this might not be a good idea. "I can take my roots and fix that easy," he says. "But maybe he ain't supposed to come back…then he'll be in your bed one morning and it'll come up on him that he's in the wrong place. That he's lost outside of time from his place that he's supposed to be in. Then both of you be lost and trapped outside of life and ain't no way for you to get back into it."

When Bynum says that Jack might not be "supposed to come back," he implies by way of negation that certain things in life are *"supposed" to happen. This is a deterministic way of thinking, a belief in a "grand design" that ultimately superimposes a greater sense of meaning and order on life. This is also in keeping with Bynum's idea that each person has a "song" they must find within themselves, something that will add significance to life and give a person a sense of purpose. For Mattie to make Jack Carper come back, then, would mean singing the wrong "song," ultimately further estranging her from what she's "supposed" to do.*

Mattie ignores Bynum's warnings, pleading with him to make Jack Carper return to her. She explains that they were together for three years before he left. Before doing so, he called her cursed because they had two babies together, and both died in infancy. Hearing this, Bynum says Jack isn't "bound" to Mattie if the babies died. "Look like somebody trying to keep you from being bound up and he's gone on back to whoever it is 'cause he's already bound up to her. Ain't nothing to be done." Declaring this, he advises Mattie to let Jack go. By way of consolation, he gives her a piece of cloth and tells her to keep it under her pillow for good luck.

Bynum elaborates on his assertion that Jack isn't "supposed to come back" to Mattie. Indeed, he indicates that Jack has become part of somebody else's "grand design," having been "bound up" to a different woman. This, he says, is unsalvageable, but he still gives Mattie a piece of cloth for good luck. When he does so, the audience might naturally wonder if he truly believes this cloth will bring her luck, or if he gives it to her because he wants to offer her a way of feeling in control of her life. After all, hope is a powerful thing, something that can impose order on otherwise defeatist and chaotic situations. By giving Mattie something to invest her faith in, then, Bynum allows her to gain a sense of agency over her own life.

Before Mattie leaves, Jeremy catches her by the door and says he overheard her story. "Had me an old gal did that to me," he says. "Woke up one morning and she was gone. Just took off to parts unknown. I woke up that morning and the only thing I could do was look around for my shoes. I woke up and got out of there. Found my shoes and took off. That's the only thing I could think of to do." As they bond over having been abandoned by their lovers, Jeremy starts complimenting Mattie on her looks, eventually saying, "A woman like you need a man. Maybe you let me be your man." When Mattie expresses hesitation because she's still waiting for Jack, Jeremy says they can pass the time together until he returns. They then decide to go on a date that night to Jeremy's **guitar** competition.

Considering that Herald Loomis is also looking for his wife, it seems in this scene that the vast majority of characters in Joe Turner's Come and Gone *have been influenced by transience. Indeed, both Mattie and Jeremy have been left behind because their lovers decided to pick up and leave. This, it seems, inspires only more restlessness, as Jeremy indicates when he tells Mattie that his first impulse after his lover ran away was to run away himself. "That's the only thing I could think of to do," he says, suggesting that migration as a way of escaping unfavorable circumstances is cyclical, a method of responding to adversity that is almost contagious throughout the community.*

In the backyard, Zonia meets a boy her age named Reuben, who lives next door. Reuben asks why she and Herald are living in Seth's house, and Zonia tells him that they're searching for her mother, who ran away. When Reuben asks why her mother ran away, she says, "I don't know. My daddy say some man named Joe Turner did something bad to him once and that made her run away." Reuben then expresses his hope that Zonia doesn't leave too soon, since there aren't any kids for him to play with these days because his friend Eugene died. Apparently, Eugene used to keep a horde of **pigeons**, which he sold one-by-one to Bynum for the old man's rituals. Just before he died, Eugene told Reuben to let his pigeons free, but Reuben couldn't stand to keep this promise and has instead continued to sell the pigeons to Bynum.

Reuben's inability to set Eugene's pigeons free aligns with the play's interest in how people keep one another restricted. First, all the characters except Selig are inhibited by the racism surrounding them in their newly post-slavery nation. Second, even Bynum's interest in "binding" people together suggests a certain restrictive quality, since to "bind" is to tie or fasten somebody or something to something else. As such, Reuben's refusal to free Eugene's pigeons is yet another example of how the characters conceive of true freedom, clearly seeing it as something that requires a herculean emotional effort, one that allows a person to overcome the sense of hesitation keeping them from embracing liberty and independence.

Herald comes into the backyard and interrupts Zonia and Reuben's conversation, ordering her inside to take a bath. "Look at you," he says. "You growing too fast. Your bones getting bigger everyday. I don't want you getting grown on me. Don't you get grown on me too soon. We gonna find your mamma. She around here somewhere. I can smell her." When he goes back inside, Reuben says, "Wow, your daddy's scary!", remarking that Herald has "mean-looking eyes." Seeing that he's offended Zonia, he tells her he's only kidding and offers to show her Eugene's pigeons, at which point the two children run offstage as the lights go out.

When Reuben tells Zonia that her father is "scary" and that he has "mean-looking eyes," the audience once again sees how Loomis must constantly contend with other people's judgments. Indeed, even a small boy jumps to conclusions about Herald's identity, assuming that he's "mean" just because he looks weary. In the same way that Seth immediately decides Herald is shifty, Reuben judges him before allowing him to demonstrate who he really is. In turn, this aligns with the idea that Loomis has trouble "harmoniz[ing]" his internal song with the external world, which apparently keeps him from making a place for himself.

ACT ONE: SCENE TWO

Sitting at the kitchen table on the following Saturday, Seth expresses once again his feelings about Herald. Apparently Herald has been seen loitering outside the church just outside town, a fact that only contributes to his mysterious aspect. Seth reminds Bertha that Martha—whom he's now sure is Loomis's wife—stayed in the boarding house for a little while before moving to a nearby town to follow the church, which relocated. When Bynum passes through the kitchen, Bertha tells Seth that *he*'s the one to talk to, since Martha originally came to the boarding house to visit the old man. Seth disagrees with this timeline, saying that Bynum wasn't around at that time. "He's one of them fellows never stay in one place. He was wandering all around the country till he got old and settled here."

Although Bynum seems rather situated and settled in Seth's house, Seth affirms in this moment that the old man has indeed spent his fair share of days wandering and living a transient lifestyle. This is perhaps why he's so apparently able to relate to people like Jeremy and Herald Loomis. Unlike Seth, he has experienced the insatiable desire to roam throughout America (and/or some negative force driving him to do so).

Bynum enters the kitchen and sits down for breakfast, asking after Herald. Seth tells him Herald's upstairs, and Bynum remarks that Herald's going to hire Selig to find Martha. "Selig can't find her," Seth says. "He talk all that…but unless he get lucky and knock on her door he can't find her." He then voices his suspicion of Herald to Bynum, but Bynum merely says, "Mr. Loomis alright, Seth. He just a man got something on his mind. He just got a straightforward mind, that's all."

Once again, Bynum proves that he's willing to grant Herald the benefit of the doubt, saying that he's "alright" and that he just seems strange because he's obsessed with something. Bynum's accepting mentality is the result of his own past as a wanderer, a transient man searching for something. Indeed, Bynum has had "something on his mind" before, so he understands Herald's situation. Seth, on the other hand, has spent his life in Pittsburgh, establishing himself as a stable craftsman and landlord. As such, it's harder for him to sympathize with Herald's need to spend his life searching for his lost wife.

Selig arrives and immediately tells Bynum not to ask about the "shiny man" because he hasn't found him. While Selig pays Seth for the dustpans, Herald comes downstairs and asks him to find Martha. Paying him a dollar, he describes his wife, explaining that the last time he saw her was in Tennessee in 1901. "I'll tell you, mister," Selig says, "you better off without them." He tells a story about his own failed marriage, explaining that one day he woke up and noticed his wife looking at him as if she wished he were dead. After pacing around the house and feeling her hateful gaze, he walked out the door once and for all, and she locked it behind him. Since then, he's never fallen in love again.

Although Selig's choice to leave home is similar to the decisions other transient characters make in Joe Turner's Come and Gone, *it's worth noting that his is purely motivated by escapist desire and interpersonal conflict. Whereas black migration and transience is inextricably linked to the history of racism and the legacy of slavery in America, Selig's decision to leave home has almost nothing to do with historical or cultural circumstances. Rather, he merely wants to flee a marriage that has soured, proving that travel is often used as a form of escapism even for white people who don't have to contend with the same bigotry and injustice.*

Selig tells Herald there's no guarantee he'll find be able to find Martha. Nonetheless, he assures his client of his expertise, saying, "My great-granddaddy used to bring Nigras across the ocean on ships." After that, his father made a living tracking down escaped slaves and returning them to plantation owners. "After Abraham Lincoln give you all Nigras your freedom papers and with you all looking all over for each other…we started finding Nigras for Nigras," he says. Having made clear that he can't make any promises, Selig assures Herald he'll return the following Saturday with more information about his search for Martha.

Once again, Wilson accentuates how the consequences of American slavery bring themselves to bear on a post-slavery world. Although Selig is a more or less friendly character, he reveals in this moment that his skills as a people finder are rooted in racism and oppression, since his family members made their wealth by tracking down black people so that other white people could enslave them. Once slavery ended, though, people finders naturally had to adapt, and so Selig started finding black people for other black people, a trade that was surely especially lucrative in the decades directly after slavery, when slaves who had been scattered throughout the country started trying to find their families. This bit of information casts Selig as a more ominous figure than he previously appeared, and the audience begins to understand that he is, above all, motivated by profit, not by compassion.

When Selig leaves, Bertha enters and Bynum tells her that Herald has hired the People Finder. "You can call him a People Finder if you want to," she replies. "I know Rutherford Selig carries people away too." Having said this, she explains that Selig lets people ride out of town with him when they want to disappear, then charges townspeople a dollar to find out what he already knows: their whereabouts.

Once it's been made apparent that Selig's trade as a people finder grows out of a tradition of racism, it's no surprise to hear that his current methods are exploitative and dishonest. As somebody who both takes people away and brings them back, Selig occupies an interesting position in a community torn between transience and stability. On the one hand, he helps satisfy a person's desire to escape; on the other hand, he helps satisfy another person's desire to regain something missing. As such, he provides an outlet for two distinct—and contradictory—feelings, ultimately profiting off of his clients' emotional discrepancies.

ACT ONE: SCENE THREE

On Sunday morning, Jeremy comes into the kitchen and announces that he won a dollar in the **guitar** contest. He asks Seth if Mattie Campbell can move into his room with him, and then pays for her board. Putting the money in his pocket, Seth heads upstairs. Remaining in the kitchen, Jeremy tells Bynum that he and Mattie are going to keep each other company, seeing that they both have been left by lovers. "Sometimes you got to be where you supposed to be," Bynum replies. "Sometimes you can get all mixed up in life and come to the wrong place." Jeremy agrees and begins praising Mattie's physical attractiveness, but Bynum interjects, saying, "You just can't look at it like that. You got to look at the whole thing. […] When you grab hold of a woman, you got something there. You got a whole world there."

Bynum's assertion that Jeremy should view a woman as an entire "world" rather than just a physical being is significant in a society that is sexist as well as racist, and it also seems to acknowledge that Mattie's ex-lover Jack probably didn't see her this way—thus making it easier for him to pick up and leave. This mentality, it seems, is intertwined with the grass-is-greener outlook many of the characters in the play adopt, one in which new places and new people are always seen as better than whatever a person has at a given time. Lust, Bynum suggests, often leads people astray.

Bynum tries to teach Jeremy to not treat women as purely physical beings, but Jeremy has trouble absorbing the lesson, saying, "Oh, I ain't ignoring [Mattie], Mr. Bynum. It's hard to ignore a woman got legs like she got." Seeing that his young friend still doesn't understand, Bynum tells Jeremy to pretend he's traveling on a ship and looking at a distant horizon. "Now," he says, "a smart man know when he see that land, it ain't just a line setting out there. He know that if you get off the water to take a good look…why, there's a whole world right there." When a knock sounds on the door, Jeremy answers it to find a stunningly beautiful woman named Molly Cunningham, who asks if there are any available rooms. Stunned, Jeremy eagerly calls for Seth so that he can accommodate Molly.

Given his wisdom regarding the grass-is-greener mentality of migration and transience, it's no surprise that Bynum uses a travel-related metaphor to teach Jeremy that women are more than purely physical beings. Indeed, acknowledging that new places are entire worlds unto themselves is something the more transient characters in Joe Turner's Come and Gone *would do well to remember, since every new environment has its own challenges and unattractive elements, which suggests that migration can't always provide the kind of emotional escape or salvation people are so desperate to find.*

Once downstairs, Seth asks Molly to pay two dollars to stay for the week. As they make the deal, Molly says, "I forgot to tell you. I likes me some company from time to time. I don't like being by myself." Seth says this is acceptable as long as she isn't working as a prostitute. Having made this agreement, Molly goes outside to visit the outhouse, and Jeremy darts to the window. "Mr. Bynum, you know what?" he says while watching Molly traverse the yard. "I think I know what you was talking about now."

Once again, Jeremy demonstrates his failure to grasp Bynum's lesson that women are more than purely physical beings. Of course, this aligns with the migratory impulse that clearly figures so prominently in Jeremy's personality—for him, newer is always better, and although he's only recently started a romantic relationship with Mattie, he quickly shifts the focus of his lustful attention to Molly, essentially training his eyes on a new horizon without considering that this horizon is more than a pretty sight.

ACT ONE: SCENE FOUR

All the boarders except Herald eat dinner in the kitchen on Sunday. In good spirits, Seth decides they should "Juba" (a style of singing "reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African Slaves"). The residents jump up and drum the table while chanting. Wilson notes that the words of their song "should include some mention of the Holy Ghost." Amidst the commotion, Herald enters and screams, "Stop it!" When everybody turns to gape at him, he says, "You all sitting up here singing about the Holy Ghost. What's so holy about the Holy Ghost? You singing and singing. You think the Holy Ghost coming?" He continues his rant about the Holy Ghost and God, eventually saying, "Why God got to be so big? Why he got to be bigger than me? How much big is there? How much big do you want?" At this point, he starts unzipping his pants.

Although Herald's averse reaction to the boarders' song about the Holy Ghost is at first hard to understand, it comes to signal his resistance to anything that references domination or subordination. Indeed, in this moment he takes issue with God's almightiness, lamenting that God is "big" and asking why He has to be so much "bigger" than him. Above all, this denotes a discomfort with authority, as if Herald can't bear to think that somebody (or something) could rule over him. Furthermore, his aversion to the Juba suggests that he wants nothing to do with something that recalls slavery. His overall reaction culminates in a bold move as he unzips his pants, clearly wanting to assert his masculinity by belittling the idea that something like religion or slavery might force him into submission.

As Herald unzips his pants, Seth shouts, "Nigger, you crazy!" In response, Herald starts speaking in tongues and dancing around the room while Seth chases him. Dropping the hysterics, Loomis says, "You all don't know nothing about me. You don't know what I done seen. Herald Loomis done seen some things he ain't got words to tell you." As he goes to walk out the door, he suddenly stops in his tracks and falls to the floor, "terror-stricken by [a] vision." When Bynum goes to him and asks what he's seen, Loomis says, "I done seen bones rise up out the water. Rise up and walk across the water." Bynum asks him to tell him more about the bones, coaxing the terrified man into telling his story one response at a time. In this manner, Herald explains his vision and Bynum repeats it before asking for more information.

There's something of a supernatural connection between Bynum and Herald here. The nature of their conversation is interesting, as Bynum encourages Herald to relate his vision using a call-and-response method of storytelling, in which he himself—the listener—actually participates in the telling of the tale. This is relevant to the play's interest in racism and slavery because slaves often used to sing using call-and-response. As such, while Herald initially bristled at hearing the Juba because it harkened back to the "African slaves," he now finds himself encouraged by this old technique, which very directly arises out of slavery. In this way, Wilson suggests that, try as he might, Herald cannot stand outside of the country's painful history.

"I come to this place…" Herald says, "to this water that was bigger than the whole world. And I looked out…and I seen these bones rise up out the water. Rise up and begin to walk on top of it." Hearing this, Bynum repeats what Herald has said, then asks what happens next. Apparently, the bones suddenly sink back down into the water before an enormous wave swells, sweeping up the bones and scattering them on the shore. At this point, Bynum becomes an active participant in the storytelling, relaying the next detail instead of asking for it; "Only they ain't bones no more," he says. Loomis agrees, explaining that now these bones have "flesh on them," black skin covering them as they lie on the shore next to Herald. "What you waiting on, Herald Loomis?" Bynum says. "I'm waiting on the breath to get into my body," he replies.

Bynum's strange ability to partake in the telling of Herald's vision further establishes their supernatural connection. Indeed, it's as if Bynum is already familiar with the experience Herald is going through, a notion made even more apparent by the fact that Herald describes the setting of his vision as a place full of "water that was bigger than the whole world." This phrasing recalls the way Bynum described his own mystical experience of learning his song; when he turned the corner with the shiny man, he entered a place that was "bigger than life." This ties these two characters together, and although Wilson doesn't yet make clear the significance of their analogous spiritual experiences, it becomes evident that Bynum's worldview will most likely eventually shed light on Loomis's strange disposition.

"The breath coming into you, Herald Loomis," Bynum says. "What you gonna do now?" Answering this question, Herald declares that he's going to stand up. "I can't lay here no more," he says. Bynum agrees with this, saying that everybody around him on the shore is standing. "The ground's starting to shake," Loomis says. "My legs," he shouts, "…my legs won't stand up!" Bynum urges him along, remarking, "Everybody's standing and walking toward the road. What you gonna do, Herald Loomis?" Still, Herald insists that his legs won't work. "They shaking hands and saying goodbye to each other," Bynum says, "and walking every whichaway down the road." With Bynum's encouragements, Herald tries to stand, but falls heavily to the floor as the stage goes dark.

The image of these unknown black people—assembled by the bones on the shore—standing up and "walking toward the road" is illustrative of the mass migration taking place in the decades after slavery. Indeed, just as ex-slaves and their ancestors start making their way out of the South, these mysterious bone-people start assembling themselves and setting off to start new lives. Unfortunately, though, Loomis himself is unable to even stand up, a notion that suggests he can't seem to find a foothold in this world, which is still shifting and taking form. That he can't use his own legs denotes his inability to attain agency and self-possession, and yet he knows he can't remain lying in one spot because everybody else is "walking every whichaway down the road," going on with their lives and leaving him to struggle on his own.

ACT TWO: SCENE ONE

The next morning, Seth raves at the kitchen table, telling Bertha he's going to kick Herald out after the scene he made the previous night. Bertha tries to reason with her husband, saying that Loomis was probably just drunk, but Seth refuses to listen and resolves to banish him as soon as he sees him. Soon Molly enters the kitchen, followed shortly thereafter by Bynum, whom Seth thanks for helping calm Herald down. "Mr. Loomis alright, Seth," Bynum says. "He just got a little excited." When Mattie comes down for breakfast, she asks if Jeremy has already left for the day, and Bynum assures her that he has, since he has to be at the bridge before the sun rises.

Once again, Seth's pragmatism and hesitancy to accept any kind of nontraditional spirituality—which he has previously referred to as "mumbo jumbo nonsense"—comes to the forefront of his personality as he resolves to kick Herald out of the boarding house. The fact that he isn't even open to hearing any sort of explanation denotes just how eager he is to distance himself from what he believes is "nonsense," an impulse arising from his desire to maintain a "respectable" household so that he can continue his stable lifestyle as a dependable craftsman.

When Herald enters the kitchen, Seth informs him that he's going to have to leave, but Loomis points out that he has already paid for the week. "Alright," Seth concedes. "Fair enough. You stay till Saturday." After glaring at Seth, Loomis leaves for the day, and Bertha ushers Seth out the back door to go work on his pots and pans. At this point, Molly asks Bynum if he's "one of them voo-doo people," and the old man explains that he has the power to "bind folks," telling her that his father also practiced folk magic, though his power was in healing people. Molly expresses her skepticism, saying she doesn't want to "be bothered with that kind of thing" because it's "too spooky." Upon hearing this, Bynum leaves the kitchen, and Molly turns to Mattie, saying she hopes she didn't offend the old man.

It's worth noting in this moment that Seth is apparently not the only person who is deeply suspicious of Bynum's folk magic and spirituality. Indeed, Molly reveals that she herself is equally cynical regarding what she refers to as "voo-doo" practices, framing the entire enterprise as nothing more than something that might "bother" her. The fact that she says this so bluntly to Bynum indicates to the audience that she is perhaps a rather unsympathetic person, somebody so committed to asserting herself that she ends up putting others down in the process.

Molly and Mattie talk about men, and Mattie explains that she and Jeremy are "keeping company till maybe Jack come back." Molly, for her part, asserts that she doesn't trust men. "They wait just until they get one woman tied and locked up with them…then they look around to see if they can get another one," she says. When she learns the babies Mattie had with Jack both died, she says this is for the better, since men get women pregnant and then leave. "Molly Cunningham ain't gonna be tied down with no babies," Molly says, explaining that she was once in love but that one day she came home and her man was leaving. "Say he was gonna send me a Special Delivery some old day," she says. In light of this, Molly resolved to not be around to receive the package, deciding to take to the road.

Yet again, Wilson presents the audience with a character who has turned to the road and embraced a life of migration and travel. At this point in the play, Molly's situation is quite run of the mill: having been left by a lover, she ran from her own pain and threw herself into a transient lifestyle as a way of protecting herself against the hurt that can come along with commitment. If this story sounds familiar, it's because it is: this is almost exactly what has happened to Jeremy. As such, Wilson once again demonstrates how common it is for people to use transience as a form of escapism.

Mattie leaves for work, and Seth comes inside just before Jeremy also reappears. Seth asks why Jeremy isn't at work, and Jeremy admits he was fired. "White fellow come by told me to give him fifty cents if I wanted to keep working," he says. "Going around to all the colored making them give him fifty cents to keep hold to their jobs. Them other fellows, they was giving it to him. I kept hold to mine and they fired me." Seth is beside himself upon hearing this, saying, "Boy, what kind of sense that make? What kind of sense it make to get fired from a job where you making eight dollars a week and all it cost you is fifty cents." In response, Jeremy says, "It didn't make no sense to me. I don't make but eight dollars. Why I got to give him fifty cents of it?"

This interaction between Seth and Jeremy perfectly represents their contradictory viewpoints when it comes to dealing with racism. Whereas Jeremy acknowledges that he's being mistreated and thus refuses to be taken advantage of, Seth focuses on the economic implications of losing a job. For him, a certain amount of racial oppression is worth enduring if there's money and stability on the line. But for a person like Jeremy—a person Wilson describes earlier in the play as somebody who thinks he can "meet life's challenges head on"—it makes "no sense" to submit to bigotry, even if speaking out against it will cost him his job.

Seth remarks that Jeremy is going to "learn the hard way," pointing out that without his job he has "nothing." "Don't make me no difference," Jeremy replies. "There's 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." When Seth leaves again, Jeremy sits down next to Molly and flirtatiously asks how she's doing. She remarks that he could probably return to work the following day without his employers even noticing, but he confesses that he's glad to have gotten fired. "I'm tired of working anyway," he says. Changing the subject, he says, "You sure look pretty." She ignores his advance, but he presses on, suggesting that they run away together.

Jeremy's conviction that it's not a big deal to have lost his job because there's "a big road out there" once again underlines the potentially attractive qualities of migration and transience. Indeed, Jeremy uses his desire to roam throughout the nation as a way of dealing with his wrongful termination. As such, his transience is both a product of America's racism—for which 400 years of slavery set a precedent—and the product of a certain restlessness and a grass-is-greener worldview. In keeping with the latter outlook, he turns his attention to Molly, completely putting Mattie out of his mind because Molly represents something new and unknown.

Responding to Jeremy's suggestion that they elope, Molly reminds him that he's "tied up with that Mattie Campbell," but he upholds that they're merely keeping each other company. He tries to convince her that they could travel around together, but Molly says she can "make it nice by herself too" and that she doesn't need anybody else to help her do so. Still, Jeremy insists that he can bring his **guitar** and they can go around making money at dances. Suddenly interested, Molly says he'll have to do more than play guitar, and he assures her he's good at gambling, too. "Molly don't work," Molly states. "And Molly ain't up for sale." Jeremy promises she won't have to work, and this seems to convince her. "There's one more thing," she says. When he asks what it is, she says, "Molly ain't going South."

When Molly says Jeremy is "tied up with" Mattie, it's almost as if she's purposefully trying to torment his wayward personality by framing his relationship with her as something restrictive and inhibiting. Sure enough, this comment seems to only make Jeremy want to run away with Molly all the more, and he eagerly accepts her rather unreasonable conditions, which state that she won't help him make money. On another note, her final statement that she won't travel to the South is Wilson's way of reminding the audience that this is a play about characters trying to move away from the painful legacy of slavery and America's terrible history.

ACT TWO: SCENE TWO

Bynum and Seth sit in the parlor playing dominoes while Bynum sings an old blues song. "They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone," he sings, eventually drawing Herald into the room. "Why you singing that song?" he asks. "Why you singing about Joe Turner?" Bynum claims he's just entertaining himself by singing this song, which he learned years ago while traveling near Memphis. "I don't like you singing that song, mister!" Loomis shouts. "You ever been to Johnstown, Herald Loomis?" Bynum asks, remarking that he looks like somebody he knew in that area. "That's around where I seen my shiny man," he adds. Going on, he asks if Herald has ever picked cotton, remarking that he looks like he's done a fair amount of farming. Interjecting, Seth proudly announces that he hasn't ever picked cotton.

"Joe Turner's Come and Gone" is an old blues song written in the years after slavery about the black men who disappeared after having been framed and captured by a renegade law enforcer capitalizing on the South's racism. By singing this, Bynum evokes the tension running rampant throughout the South after the fall of slavery. The fact that this song draws Herald into the parlor suggests once again that he and Bynum occupy a similar spiritual wavelength, as Bynum seems to know something about Herald. In this moment, it's rather clear that Bynum is trying to get to the bottom of Herald's personal history and his experience in the South. Of course, Seth appears utterly unaware of Bynum's efforts and is merely proud to be able to claim that he has never picked cotton in his life.

Herald asks how Bynum knows so much about him, and Bynum says his father taught him this skill. "Say when you look at a fellow, if you taught yourself to look for it, you can see his song written on him." He adds that Herald looks like a person who's forgotten his song. "Now," he says, "I used to travel all up and down this road and that…looking here and there. Searching. Just like you, Mr. Loomis. I didn't know what I was searching for. The only thing I knew was something was keeping me dissatisfied." He explains the feeling of finding his song, asserting, "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. That's why I can tell you one of Joe Turner's niggers."

Bynum provides some insight into why people often are so drawn to lives of migration and transience, suggesting that the desire to travel often arises from a feeling of "dissatisf[action]," some kind of abstract discontentment that keeps a person moving from in search of something to give life meaning. This meaningful thing everyone is searching for, Bynum upholds, is a "song" that will solidify a person's purpose. A person without a song, he says, must go "off in search of it." At the end of his brief monologue, he says he can tell that Loomis was a victim of Joe Turner, revealing what the audience has no doubt already suspected: that he does in fact know more than Herald would expect about his life.

"How you see that?" Herald asks. "I got a mark on me? Joe Turner done marked me to where you can see it?" In response, Bynum merely sings the old Joe Turner blues song, which encourages Herald to tell the story of how he was captured by Joe Turner and forced to labor for him for seven years. "Joe Turner catched me in nineteen hundred and one. Kept me seven years until nineteen hundred and eight," he says. He explains that he was walking on a road outside Memphis and came upon a group of gamblers. Because he was a deacon, he decided to preach to these sinners, hoping he could "turn some of them." Suddenly, "Joe Turner, brother of the Governor of the great sovereign state of Tennessee, swooped down" and captured him.

Herald's backstory aligns with the actual history of Joe Turner, a man also known as Joe Turney, who was indeed the brother of the Governor of Tennessee. In charge of transporting prisoners to the penitentiary, Joe Turney would purposefully frame black men for crimes—such as gambling—so that he could then have total control over them as prisoners without rights. On his route to the penitentiary he often sold these prisoners to farms and plantations along the Mississippi River. The blues song that originates from his name is called "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" because this is what people used to say when somebody would ask why all of the black men in a given town had disappeared.

Still telling his story to Seth and Bynum, Herald says that Joe Turner let him go after seven years of forced labor, at which point he went back to the place he and his family had been sharecropping, but Martha and Zonia were gone. When he went to Martha's mother's house, he discovered that Martha left Zonia with her and went off of her own, so he took Zonia with him and has been searching for his wife ever since. This was four years ago, and now the only thing he wants is to "see her face" so that he can get "a starting place in the world." Elaborating, he says, "I been wandering a long time in somebody else's world. When I find my wife that be the making of my own."

When Herald says he's been "wandering a long time in somebody else's world," he reinforces Wilson's original notion that Loomis is unable to "harmonize" his "song" with the external world, which he wants to "recreate" so that it "contains his image." Indeed, the world doesn't contain his image because it is "somebody else's": Joe Turner's. Because Joe Turner so flagrantly derailed Herald's life, his influence looms large even after he released the poor man, so large that Herald feels like he's still living in Turner's world. By seeing his wife's face, then, he will essentially be able to pick up where he left off, thereby making his own world.

Bynum asks Herald why Joe Turner captured him, but Loomis says he never even got physically close enough to the man to ask such a question. He resolves that he must have had something Turner wanted, but Seth interrupts to say, "He just want you to do his work for him. That's all." Bynum disagrees with this, saying, "What he wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song to be his. He thought by catching you he could learn that song." He also adds, "Now he's got you bound up to where you can't sing your own song." Looking at Bynum, Herald says one more thing before the lights go off: "I know who you are. You one of them bones people."

Bynum's assertion that Joe Turner has Herald "bound up" is interesting, considering that Bynum himself binds people together. But whereas Bynum binds people to others in an attempt to forge unification and love, Joe Turner binds people in a more literally inhibiting sense, preventing somebody like Herald from being free and singing his "song." Furthermore, when Herald says that Bynum is "one of them bones people," he finally acknowledges that he and Bynum share a spiritual connection, since the "bones people" are the ones he saw in his vision. This is perhaps why Bynum was able to partake in the telling of this vision—after all, he seems to have lived it himself.

ACT TWO: SCENE THREE

When the lights come up onstage, Bynum and Mattie are eating breakfast while Bertha works over the stove. Bynum talks to Mattie about the charm cloth he gave her, but Bertha tells him to hush. He obeys and leaves the kitchen as Herald enters. When Herald sits to eat, Bertha advises Mattie to not listen to Bynum. "That kind of stuff," she says, "Even if it do work for a while, it don't last." She also suggests that Mattie not worry about Jeremy, who ran off with Molly. "I seen it coming," Bertha says. She assures Mattie that Jeremy isn't worth worrying about, and that she shouldn't waste time wishing for men to return. "You get all that trouble off your mind and just when it look like you ain't never gonna find what you want…you look up and it's standing right there. That's how I met my Seth."

Whereas Bynum believes every person is part of a "grand design" and that this design can be helped along with certain rituals, Bertha believes the future is best left untouched. What's interesting is that this mindset actually reinforces the determinist viewpoint Bynum espouses, since Bertha invests herself in the idea that what's meant to be will inevitably take place. This notion ultimately aligns with Bynum's ideas about existing in a "grand design," since Bertha's belief in inevitability emphasizes the fact that people are part of something bigger than themselves.


Seth comes inside, sees Herald, and reminds him that it's Tuesday. Annoyed, Bertha pulls her husband out of the kitchen, leaving Herald and Mattie alone. They talk idly about how Loomis needs to find his wife to get a "starting place in the world," and Mattie says she hopes he succeeds. "I been watching you," Herald admits. "I been watching you watch me." He moves closer, saying, "Come here and let me touch you," and Mattie says, "I ain't got enough for you. You'd use me up too fast." In response, Herald says, "Herald Loomis got a mind seem like you a part of it since I first seen you." He reaches to touch her, lightly putting his fingers on her but suddenly stopping, apparently unable to embrace her. "I done forgot how to touch," he says.

The fact that Herald has forgotten "how to touch" illustrates the extent to which his experience with Joe Turner has cut him off from leading a normal life. Still feeling the effects of hatred forced upon him by a white tyrant, Herald's ability to relate to others is stunted. In this moment, the audience senses that this is perhaps part of the reason why he needs to see Martha's face and thus start his "own" world again; he needs to remember how to love. Having been taken from his wife, his conception of romance and human intimacy has essentially been paused. As such, he can't bring himself to "touch" Mattie, since he's still beholden to Martha even if it's been years since he's seen her.

ACT TWO: SCENE FOUR

The next morning, Zonia and Reuben are playing outside when Reuben says he saw Bynum the previous night "singing and talking to the wind." He claims that the wind was talking back to Bynum, and then tells Zonia he saw a ghost that very morning. Apparently, he saw Seth's mother's spirit, who told him that he has to honor the promise he made to Eugene about letting the **pigeons** free. "Didn't you promise Eugene something?" she said, hitting him with her cane. "Let them pigeons go," she ordered. The two children consider whether or not this old woman was an angel sent by Eugene, and Reuben delights at the idea that perhaps Eugene will be able to come back himself. "My daddy say if you miss somebody too much it can kill you," Zonia says.

As the play nears its final act, it's no surprise that Reuben is encouraged to set Eugene's pigeons free. Indeed, the idea of letting these cooped-up creatures out into the open is symbolic of Herald Loomis's search for personal freedom and independence, which seems to be inching ever closer toward liberation as he slowly unburdens himself of the secrets of his past.

Reuben asks Zonia when she and Herald will be leaving, and she tells him they're getting kicked out on Saturday. Reuben is disappointed to hear this, saying that sometimes it feels like "nothing ever stay the same." He then admits that by his own inexperienced estimation, he thinks he'll be her husband when they grow up. He asks if he can kiss her, and she says he can. Afterward, they kiss again and Reuben puts his head against her chest and listens to her heartbeat. "When I get grown, I come looking for you," he says before the lights fade.

When Reuben complains that "nothing ever stay[s] the same," he indicates his awareness of the fact that he lives in a community marked by transience. Indeed, he's surrounded by people who move in and out of his life, stopping at Seth's boarding house only for short periods at a time before leaving for new horizons. This is undoubtedly why he promises to "come looking for" Zonia when he's an adult—rather than declaring that he'll stay by her side no matter what, he accepts her departure as an inevitability. As such, telling her that he'll track her down later in life is an ultimate pronouncement of love and commitment, a sentiment Reuben has surely seen modeled by the many residents of Seth's boarding house, many of whom set off in search of lost lovers.

ACT TWO: SCENE FIVE

It is Saturday morning, and Bertha is making breakfast while Bynum, Herald, and Zonia sit at the table waiting for Selig to arrive. It's raining outside, and Bynum posits that the roads have washed out, making it harder for Selig to travel. As they wait, Mattie comes downstairs and sits down, asking Loomis where he's going to go. "We gonna see where the road take us," he says. He then tells his daughter that they have to get going, and moves toward the door. Before they do so, Mattie gives Zonia a ribbon to match her dress, then turns to Loomis and says, "I hope you find her. I hope you be happy." Before he leaves, he says, "A man looking for a woman be lucky to find you. You a good woman, Mattie. Keep a good heart."

Once again, transience and migration come to the forefront of Joe Turner's Come and Gone, *this time manifesting in the way Herald wraps his head around being forced to leave the boarding house. Indeed, he embraces that he and Zonia must leave, asserting almost optimistically—or at least not particularly begrudgingly—that they're going to "see where the road take[s]" them. For a man who's traveled for four years in search of his wife, the prospect of taking to the road again is natural, thus showing that transience is something to which a person can become accustomed.*

After Herald and Zonia leave, Bertha remarks that his behavior toward Mattie was "the closest [she] come to seeing him act civilized." Turning to Mattie, she says, "I don't know what's between you all, Mattie…but the only thing that man needs is somebody to make him laugh. That's all you need in the world is love and laughter." Demonstrating this to her tenants, she erupts in euphoric, crazed laughter. Wilson notes that she "moves about the kitchen as though blessing it and chasing away the huge sadness that seems to envelop it. It is a dance and demonstration of her own magic, her own remedy that is centuries old and to which she is connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood's memory." Her laughter, he writes, is like a "celebration of life, both its pain and its blessing."

Bertha again emerges as a well-balanced person who's in touch with both the practical side of life and the emotional and spiritual elements of existence. She doesn't commit herself to just one way of being like Seth or Bynum, but rather allows herself to draw upon a range of belief, thereby absorbing life and finding herself capable of making it into a "celebration" of sorts. Wilson indicates this when he says that she blesses the kitchen with her "own magic," suggesting that while somebody like Bynum borrows his craft from a folk tradition, Bertha creates a unique blend of her own, one naturally embedded in the "muscles of her heart."

As Bertha, Bynum, and Mattie laugh, Seth enters and joins their hysterics. Eventually, he says that Herald is standing on the corner, just watching the house. At that moment, Selig appears with Martha Loomis (also known as Martha Pentecost), who's dressed "as befitting a member of an Evangelist church." Bynum exclaims that Selig is "a sure enough first-class People Finder," and Selig says he found Martha living by the church just outside town. Martha asks where her husband and daughter are, and as Seth begins to explain, the door opens and Herald and Zonia appear onstage. They say hello, and Herald says, "You ain't waited for me, Martha. I got out the place looking to see your face." In response, Martha promises him she's been looking for him. "I wasn't but two months behind you when you went to my mama's and got Zonia," she says.

Finally, Herald has found Martha and is able to look upon her face, thus beginning the process of making his "own world." And although the audience might expect him to be overjoyed in this moment, he doesn't embrace his long-lost wife. In fact, he speaks rather resentfully, accusing her of running away and not waiting for him to be released from the captivity of Joe Turner. As such, it slowly becomes clear that Loomis's goal of seeing Martha's face and making his "own world" most likely has nothing to do with simply enabling him to pick up where he left off in his old life—rather, he seems to want closure before moving on with the rest of his life.

Herald accuses Martha of leaving his daughter "motherless in the world," but Martha insists she never intended to do so. She tells him their reverend decided to move the church north, and since she didn't know if the journey would be safe, she left Zonia with the girl's grandmother with the intention of fetching her once she got settled in the North. By the time she returned, though, Herald had already collected Zonia. "Herald," she says, "I didn't know if you was ever coming back. They told me Joe Turner had you and my whole world split half in two."

The fact that Herald accuses Martha of leaving Zonia "motherless in the world" only further supports the notion that his desire to reunite with his wife has nothing to do with wanting to happily resume their married life. This, it seems, is not a blissful encounter, but a confrontation, one in which Herald can finally settle the matters that have clearly been plaguing his mind since he escaped Joe Turner.

Herald's disappearance was so painful, Martha explains, that she had to tell herself he'd died. "Even if you weren't," she says, "you was dead to me. I wasn't gonna carry you with me no more. So I killed you in my heart. I buried you. I mourned you. And then I picked up what was left and went on to make my life without you." Having said this, she adds, "I was a young woman with life at my beckon. I couldn't drag you behind me like a sack of cotton."

Martha's harsh words surely must cut straight to Herald's core, since her ability to move on from the painful past is essentially an example of the kind of emotional reparation Herald himself is trying to undergo. Indeed, she "killed" him in her heart so that she could thrive in her present reality, something he needs to do for himself in order to unburden himself from a personal history of oppression. Of course, racism and hate aren't so easily erased, something Herald most likely knows, considering that he's had so much trouble putting his life back together after Joe Turner violated his supposedly inalienable human rights. It's also worth noting that Martha compares carrying Herald's memory around to dragging a "sack of cotton," as this image is charged with the history of slavery, since slaves often labored in cotton fields. As such, Martha conflates the burden of romantic memory with the ugly history of slavery and oppression.

Herald listens to Martha's explanation and says he's been waiting years to see her face to say his goodbye. "That goodbye got so big at times," he says, "seem like it was gonna swallow me up." He asserts that this need to say goodbye to his wife kept him "bound up to the road." Now, though, he can finally finish this process; "Now that I see your face I can say my goodbye and make my own world," he says. Taking Zonia's hand, he leads his daughter to her mother, saying she needs to live with Martha so that she can learn from both her mother and father and thus avoid being a "one-sided person." Despite Herald's instructions, Zonia clings to her father, shouting, "I won't get no bigger! My bones won't get no bigger! [...] Take me with you till we keep searching and never finding."

When Zonia says, "Take me with you till we keep searching and never finding," she illustrates how a lifestyle of transience and constant migration often regenerates itself, creating a never-ending cycle of travel. In turn, the process of searching becomes more important than the actual process of finding. Indeed, Zonia wants to "keep searching and never finding" because this is the way she has lived the past four years—years that have clearly formed her worldview and instilled in her a desire to roam from town to town with her beloved (if misunderstood) father.

Martha comforts Zonia and turns to Bynum, thanking him. Seeing this, Herald erupts. "It was you!" he says. "All the time it was you that bind me up! You bound me to that road!" In response, Bynum says, "I ain't bind you, Herald Loomis. You can't bind what don't cling." Still, Herald doesn't believe him. "Everywhere I go people wanna bind me up," he says. "Joe Turner wanna bind me up! [...] You wanna bind me up. Everybody wanna bind me up. Well, Joe Turner's come and gone and Herald Loomis ain't for no binding. I ain't gonna let nobody bind me up!" With this, he suddenly takes out a knife as Bynum explains that it wasn't Loomis who he bound to Martha, but Zonia. "That's who I bound," he says. "You binding yourself. You bound onto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it."

In this moment, Herald interprets Bynum's ability to unite people with one another as a restrictive and oppressive practice, something that inhibits his sense of freedom. Interestingly enough, he accuses Bynum not of binding him to Martha, but to the road, suggesting that he resents the restless travel and endless searching he's had to indulge for the past four years. However, Bynum points out that Herald is actually the one keeping himself "bound" up, since he's seemingly inextricably linked to his song—a song he can't manage to "stand up and sing." It isn't until Herald finally manages to "harmonize" this song with the external world that he'll be able to stop searching for it.

Bynum tells Herald that if he can "stand up and sing" his song, he'll finally be free. At this point, Martha implores Herald to get ahold of himself, pointing out his apparent savagery. "You gone over to the devil," she says, and tries to bring him back to religion by quoting the Bible. As she references Jesus and the Lord, Loomis offers a running commentary, critiquing her faith in a worldview that invites subordination and oppression. "Great big old white man," he responds to her sermonizing, "...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." Still, Martha insists that Herald needs to find God, saying, "You got to be clean, Herald. You got to be washed with the blood of the lamb," telling him that Jesus bled for him.

During his conversation with Martha, Herald once again expresses his skepticism about religion and his strong aversion to God's almightiness. Railing against Jesus and God by emphasizing their white and domineering qualities, he frames Christianity as something used to subordinate black people. Throughout this argument, it becomes overwhelmingly apparent how different he and Martha have become. Although Herald was presumably a devoted Christian at one point in his life—judging by the fact that he was a deacon before Joe Turner captured him—he now can't stand the mere idea of submitting himself to religion. Martha, on the other hand, has remained faithful to the church, and their differences emphasize just how much Herald's experience as one of Joe Turner's captives has changed him.

Herald asserts that he doesn't need anybody to bleed for him, since he can do so for himself. In response, Martha says, "You got to be something, Herald! You just can't be alive. Life don't mean nothing unless it got a meaning." Rejecting this, Loomis asks, "What kind of meaning you got? What kind of clean you got, woman? You want blood? Blood make you clean?" At this, he runs the knife across his chest and rubs his own blood on his face. Wilson notes that, in doing so, Loomis comes to a sudden "realization." "I'm standing!" the blood-covered man shouts. "I'm standing. My legs stood up! I'm standing now!"

When Herald slashes himself across the chest and rubs blood over himself, the audience is reminded of Bynum's story of the shiny man, who made Bynum hold out his hands and smear blood over his body before he finally had his vision. This, the shiny man had explained to him, was a way of cleansing himself. As such, Herald seems to have cleansed himself with his own blood, thereby gaining a sense of agency that allows him to finally "stand" (seemingly a reference to his earlier vision, in which he was unable to get up). In turn, he validates his own claim that he doesn't need Jesus to bleed for him, since his sudden epiphany comes as the result of his decision to bleed for himself, an act of autonomy and self-possession.

At this point, Wilson provides a detailed note, establishing that Herald Loomis has finally "found his song, the song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh [...]" Suddenly free from his own struggles, Loomis says the fateful words he's been waiting to utter for years: "Goodbye, Martha." Having said this, he turns and makes his exit, and as Mattie runs to join him, Bynum calls out, "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!"

In keeping with his assertion that he has finally managed to stand on his own two legs, Herald Loomis manages in this moment to attain a sense of "self-sufficiency," which enables him to free himself from "encumbrance[s]" like the memory of Joe Turner. Metaphorically speaking, the fact that Herald is able to stand suggests that he has, after all this time, found a foothold in the chaotic new world order brought on by the fall of slavery, a significant accomplishment considering that he was previously so scarred by America's racist history and his own embattled past that he couldn't even remember how to "touch" another human. In addition, when Bynum yells out that Herald is "shining," the audience learns why these two men have had such a close spiritual connection throughout the play: Herald is one of the shiny men Bynum has been searching for ever since his father told him that seeing another shiny man would mean that his (Bynum's) song had been accepted. Now that he's met Herald, then, he knows he can lie down and die a happy man.

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