## Chapter II

### Between Slavery and Freedom: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Following the Reconstruction period in the South and then the 1896 Supreme Court ruling about the "separate but equal" status, the Southern states began to impose segregation and enforce Jim Crow laws by rewriting each state's constitution, legislating an exclusionist policy toward African-Americans. "By 1907," as Bogumil says, "many African-Americans had moved to Northern industrial cities to escape the impact of this constitutional discrimination and to find work other than that of itinerant sharecroppers and docile servants." With the huge migration came feelings of displacement to many of those who were former slaves and the sons and daughters of those slaves. "These feelings," she further says, "were symptomatic reactions to their new social climate. While the African Americans were now free men and women in the North, their freedom unfortunately often took the form of a self-imposed isolation, perhaps a vestige of their marginalization as a culture in the antebellum South" ("Tomorrow Never" 390).

This historical sense of displacement has been dramatized in its entire psychological vicissitudes in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986), set in a boardinghouse in 1911 Pittsburgh. The play deals with the ways in which the displacement launches the

destinies of blacks in urban America. Its characters are sons and daughters of newly freed slaves seeking to make a place for themselves in an environment which is polyethnic and certainly hostile. "Foreigners" in a strange land, they are in search of their voice, a "song," which will enable them to survive with their own individual and cultural identities, a song that, perhaps, will lead them down the "right road" to a new future.

In the play, the apparent endlessness of individual quest is associated with the nature of displacement that launches the search. Each individual quest is, therefore, like a journey in search of something intangible and mystical. They are all, in one way or another, searching for themselves--a search which can only reach a successful end when the past is carried forward into the present and the future. No doubt, they are unable to go back along the path of a lost past; instead, they must use signposts of a remembered past to find out the way in which they should direct their footsteps to a new future. The innumerable references to roads, traveling feet--as well as the constant coming and going of characters in and out of the boardinghouse--create the effect of a restless world. "Against this backdrop," says Pereira, "these characters appear as archetypes reflecting countless blacks in similar circumstances--a whole race of

people somewhere out there on a pilgrimage toward self-fulfillment" (63).

The quest for self-authentication is focused chiefly on the protagonist, Herald Loomis, a former deacon struggling to emerge from white oppression vividly symbolized in the fabled Tennessee bounty hunter, Joe Turner. Wilson sees seven years of Loomis's servitude to Joe Turner as metaphorical, as representative of all the years of African-American slavery, and Loomis's search as emblematic of the need of the newly freed slaves to reconnect with their families and themselves. Loomis, says Wilson, is "driven . . . 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" (*Joe Turner's* 216). Bynum Walker, the conjurer in the play, calls his quest a search for his song: "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" (*Joe Turner's* 268). Without this song he is doomed to wander through life aimlessly, unaware of who he is or what his purpose may be. This song is the music of his--and, of course, of all black people--essential nature, his true identity. And that identity, with its special rhythms, charts the course of his survival. Each individual's song is distinctive, with its

power deriving from the distinctive blend of each person's characteristics. Bynum himself has the Binding Song; his father had the Healing Song. Father made the individual whole; the son does the same for relationships.

Seven years of slavery has denied Loomis his human rights and reduced him to Joe Turner's property. When he is freed, he experiences the predicament of a newly freed slave. Displaced of his roots, without family, home, or job, he is in an environment that still fails to recognize him as human. Although he is looking to start anew, his present circumstances replicate the past. Under such conditions, he comes to assume that the future lies elsewhere. He goes off on a search to find a "starting place" for remaking the self. Once on the road, he begins to experience the suffering of his forefathers who were separated from their tribes. But while their suffering gave them a new religion in Christianity, his imprisonment slowly strips him of his adopted faith. Once concerned about saving the lost souls of gamblers, he now wants no part of what Wilson calls "the white man's God" ("Interview with Bill Moyers" 178). Forced by his ordeal to confront his African self, he begins to discover that self-empowerment can occur only with the full realization of his African identity. But standing in his way is the disturbing presence of his "Christian self symbolized in the

Holy Ghost, all the more anathematic to him because his wife has left him for the Evangelist church" (Pereira 73). His spiritual crisis deepens in Seth Holly's boardinghouse when the lodgers perform a variant of the "ring shout" configured as the Juba dance, which, according to Anderson, is "an Afro-Christian ritual in which frenzied dance and ecstatic shouts mediated an experience of possession or inspiration by the Holy Ghost" (452). He is, hurled one way, then the other, and soon is overtaken by a haunting vision of bones walking across the ocean and then sinking back into the water. They rise again from their watery graves, march on the ocean's surface, and, when they are finally washed ashore, Loomis sees that they get flesh on them and that they are black people like him. Then they separate from one another and take different paths, embarking on a long afflicting journey. These bones symbolize African slaves, Loomis's ancestors who perished in the holds of slave-ships and whose bodies were thrown into the Atlantic Ocean. These "dead Africans," says Pereira, "never made it physically across the water but are an integral part of the whole black experience in America" (74). In a massive racial struggle for survival, these blacks were the first victims of an exploitative white culture. For Wilson, their reminiscence is a link between

the old African tradition and an emerging African-American identity.

To understand his true destiny in America Loomis must relive the whole experience of his race. He must understand, as Harrison says, that "despite the trauma of slavery and the consequent degradation of the body, the ancestors achieve spiritual ascendancy as they 'walk on water' and arrive in the New World with flash on their bones. Inside the spiritual dynamism of the ancestors . . . is the true song of redemption and liberation" (314). And once Loomis bears witness to the true song in the vision of the ancestors, he can become part of this spirituality for his own redemption. He understands the past in relation to his victimization and rejects the charges of worthlessness which oppression forced upon him. He becomes strong enough to say "goodbye" to what he has lost and reclaim the self that Joe Turner has not been able to take away fully. What Loomis has lost is the life he had with his wife, Martha, before Joe Turner came. He does not reclaim that life except as a past that comes back only to be left behind. On finding Martha, he says: "I just wanted to see your face to know that the world was still there. Make sure everything still in its place so I could reconnect myself together" (*Joe Turner's* 284). Loomis says goodbye to Martha, but this goodbye is everything.

By relinquishing the past, he also reclaims it as his own, in a sense, nullifying Joe Turner's expropriation. His declaration, "Well, Joe Turner's come and gone and Herald Loomis ain't for no binding" (*Joe Turner's* 286), transforms the meaning of the words sung by women whose men had been taken away. The words no longer communicate present loss but consign Joe Turner to a history of which Loomis is the subject. Repossessed of the past, Loomis is no longer its victim but the measure of its meaning, free to judge it and reject what seems false, including the Christian faith that his wife tries to lead him back to. He rejects Christian promises of salvation as complicit with African-American historical oppression and declaring, "I don't need nobody to bleed for me!" (*Joe Turner's* 288), slashes himself across the chest. "Loomis's blasphemy and bloodletting," says Shannon, "represent an extreme denunciation of Christian belief by an African American and an extreme act to compensate its loss." Loomis is, no doubt, a tormented African-American man; yet, instead of renewing his faith in God, he not only viciously blasphemes Him but also resorts to self-infliction as a measure of his disgust. "Loomis's self-flagellation," Shannon further says, "forces one to examine this man and others like him within the entire context of their sufferings--internal and external. They each stagger from the

weight of antagonistic forces around them, which seem to favor their being nomads rather than the crucial cohesive element in their families" ("Good Christian" 385). In the case of Loomis, however, this declaration of self-sufficiency, together with his break with the pieties of Christianity, is also one which reconnects him with a collective identity and a heritage of self-empowerment. Reclaiming himself and translating a collective past into the present, he becomes indeed the shiny man who knows his own song and, "shining like new money" (*Joe Turner's* 289), shows the way.

Bynum's search is not the same as Loomis's. Loomis searches for himself through recovery of the past; Bynum is dedicated to finding what he calls another Shiny Man, who can guide him and validate the efficiency of his own song. Though Bynum and Loomis represent opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their personal search, their destinies are intertwined. The search for the Shiny Man is a collaborative and, indeed, a collective project; for the self is enmeshed in a past that is held in common with others. The first Shiny Man Bynum met on the road many years ago seemed to emanate light. The Shiny Man gave him "the Secret of Life" and showed him the path he was to follow on a journey that would not be complete until he discovered another Shiny Man. Bynum's encounter with his Shiny

Man connected him to a large continuum in which he found his song. He chose the Binding Song: "Been binding people together ever since. That's why they call me Bynum. Just like glue I sticks people together" (*Joe Turner's* 213). Discovery of another Shiny Man will indicate to Bynum that he has completed his life's work. Having built his future from the stones of his past, Bynum will have left his mark on society and he will have fulfilled his destiny. He, therefore, devotes all his energy to his mission. All he needs now is another Shiny Man to give approval to his work, to corroborate his belief that he can survive as a mender of broken relationships.

Reading Bynum's story in the light of African mythology suggests that the Shiny Man who guided him toward his song and then disappeared in blinding light must be Odu Ifa, who, according to Clara Odugbesan, "is a mythological deity of the Ifa tradition in Yoruban Cosmology." Odugbesan describes Ifa "not as a deity to be worshipped, but as an oracle from which people try to obtain certainty from uncertainty in any human problem . . ." (202). Bynum himself, according to this paradigm, owes his mythological ancestry to the Ifa tradition and his Binding song is the task of uniting African-Americans. He too is the oracular voice from whom the other characters seek affirmation and solutions in this world of upheavals. Bynum

hopes to see the Shiny Man again. If the Shiny Man is a guide, he is not an otherworldly or even exceptional individual. As Bynum tells Selig, a white peddler, "I ain't even so sure he's one special fellow. That shine would pass on to anybody. He could be anybody shining" (*Joe Turner's* 211). The Shiny Man is an ordinary man who, possessing his song as "a voice inside him telling him which way to go . . ." (*Joe Turner's* 212), is able to guide others toward repossession of their songs, toward becoming shiny men in their own right. And since that shine could pass on to anybody, says Anderson, "the shiny man is also the individual who has not yet found his song, one who searches for himself. That search takes place in the world, and for Bynum to see the shiny man "again" means assisting that search by acting as the shiny-man guide to another. Seeing the shiny man again does not entail Bynum's deliverance from the world but confirmation of his contribution to it" (449). As Bynum's father told him, "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 . . ." (*Joe Turner's* 213).

In addition to making his own search, Bynum is a spiritual agent for all the other characters, a catalyst for their search. As a true guardian angel, he becomes deeply involved with the

person he is trying to help. He joins only those people who are meant to be together: "I'm a Binder of What Clings. You got to find out if they cling first. You can't bind what don't cling" (*Joe Turner's* 213). He tells Mattie Campbell that he can put a spell on her husband, Jack Carper, to return, but he warns against bringing back a person, who "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" (*Joe Turner's* 223).

Bynum believes that in this dismembered world of black people only healthy relationships are worth preserving. The search for one's song is a quest for spiritual transcendence, a sensitive journey into the innermost depths of one's being in pursuit of self-affirmation. Only people truly committed to each other can undertake such a journey. The conflict between Mattie and Carper over the loss of their babies has separated forever his destiny from hers, and his path now leads him to someone else. Bynum intuitively knows that Mattie's relationship with Carper is potentially destructive and that her only way is to break free. Mattie must survive for herself. Her two children are

dead and there is nothing that can bind her to Carper. Somehow she needs to separate herself from him just as he has separated himself from her. This is difficult for Mattie to accomplish herself. But Bynum, reaching deep into Mattie's African roots, brings succor to her and helps her push Carper off her mind. Before offering the solution, he hints that she may soon find a replacement for her lost husband: "Jack Carper gone off to where he belong. There's somebody searching for your doorstep right now" (*Joe Turner's* 225).

Where Bynum owes his mythological ancestry to Ifa, Loomis owes his to Eshu-Eligbara, who, according to Harrison, is "the trickster deity of Yoruba mythology" (302). In a way Eshu and Ifa are opposites, as Odugbesan points out:

> The roles of Eshu and Ifa within the cosmological system of ideas are diametrically opposed to one another. Ifa is a system whose function is to promote orderliness in the world, one that corrects all wrongs by mediating between men and gods for good, and produces certainty where there is uncertainty. Eshu, on the other hand, is associated with disorderliness and confusion. . . . Both Eshu and Ifa mediate between men and their gods; but while one [Eshu] disrupts

> relationship between them, the other [Ifa] consolidates it. (201)

These two traditions operate simultaneously within the African-American cosmology like Apollo and Dionysus in ancient Greece. Although Eshu is opposed to Ifa, Africans discovered that both forces needed to be present together in their culture. Gates Jr. says, "Esu is the path [or route] to Ifa" (*Signifying* 15). Each of them alone would present a one-dimensional world of either order or chaos. Together they symbolize the complexities of living that derive from daily renegotiations of the very oppositions represented by them. In fact, the term "opposition" is almost a misnomer; rather the forces appear to be complementary entities in a complex cultural system. Being descendants of two opposing ancestries, Bynum and Loomis have significantly different natures. The former is guided by reason, the later by emotion. It is natural that they finally achieve individual authentication only by working together. Bynum's cooperation facilitates Loomis's step toward establishing independence, Loomis's assistance enables Bynum to get his Shiny Man. Though Bynum has no tangible involvement in the search for Martha, below the surface it is Bynum's magic that brings Loomis and his wife together--not because they can reunite, for neither wishes to do so, but because Loomis can end

his search and Zonia, their daughter, can be with her mother again.

While Loomis realizes his personal servitude, he does not recognize initially the connection he has with the enslaved whom he sees in his haunting vision of bones walking on the ocean water. He wants to walk with them, but is unable to stand up. This is a crucial revelation of Loomis's dilemma; he cannot join those on the road, though he wants to. He is unable to accept what the vision is revealing to him--that slavery is his history, too, that these people are his people, and that he must acknowledge his past if he is to establish his place in the world and move effectively into the future. But when Bynum encourages Loomis to discuss his past and tells him he must find his song in himself and bring it out, Loomis begins to understand: "You bound onto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it, Herald Loomis. It's right there kicking at your throat. All you got to do is sing it. Then you be free" (*Joe Turner's* 287). By recognizing Bynum's mystical power, Loomis takes steps toward accepting his past and achieving a meaningful life. In all of Loomis's interaction with Bynum, Wilson seeks to clarify Loomis's progress toward his salvation--a salvation which comes from recognition and acceptance of one's personal and cultural past. Subsequently,

when Loomis slashes himself across the chest and rubs his cleansing blood over his face, he performs a ritual. Harrison's suggestion that this bloodletting is a reenactment of "the Osirian mythos, which invites the death of the body in order to allow for the resurrection of the spirit/body . . . ," locates this ritual firmly within the African cosmology. Loomis's self-infliction symbolizes insightful "death." For his "body," as Harrison says, "becomes the seeding of the new soul, the body glided with the precious life-force--blood--until it shines like the armor of pure song/spirit." Such discernment of ancestral experience in Harrison's view "offers the oppressed an opportunity to disregard flesh and spirit as opposing forces and to view their suffering in the context of a spiritual continuum that reassures physical liberation" (313-14). Bynum recognizes this blood-cleansing as a reenactment of his Shiny Man's ritual, and, as Loomis runs from the room, Bynum knows that his own search has also ended. He has found his Shiny Man: "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!" (*Joe Turner's* 289). Loomis's first name, Herald, partakes of the significance of the title of the Shiny Man--one who goes before and shows the way. Thus, Bynum and Loomis achieve together individual affirmation and collective rapprochement.

Bynum is a Binder. He has the power to bring people together--a power derived from faith and strength of spirit. The other character in the play that brings people together is, of course, Selig, the People Finder, who accidentally discovers people's lost relatives while selling pots and pans. Selig is the one to find Loomis's wife and bring her back to the boardinghouse. Both men's skill at bringing people together has been passed on through generations, and both men retain something of the character of their forebears. Bynum's father helped Bynum find his Binding song. Selig's grandfather was a "bringer" working on the ships, which transported Africans into slavery. From his blood, his past, Bynum drew enlightenment, while Selig has inherited a kind of blindness. But "Selig," for Wilson, "is not evil at all. In fact, he's performing a very valuable service for the community" ("Interview with Kim Powers" 374). Despite Wilson's sympathy, Selig's job is no less malicious than the jobs held by his grandfather and father. He creates his own advantages out of the "peculiar situation" of the blacks. To be "found" by him, a black man and woman must first buy something from him. Selig's control over this human exchange is even more extensive in that he represents the institutions and practices that initially reduced blacks to property. As Seth Holly's wife, Bertha, points out:

> You can call him a People Finder if you want to. I know Rutherford Selig carries people away too. He done carried a whole bunch of them away from here. Folks plan on leaving plan by Selig's timing. They wait till he get ready to go, then they hitch a ride on his wagon. Then he charge folks a dollar to tell them where he took them. Now, that's the truth of Rutherford Selig. This old People Finding business is for the birds. He ain't never found nobody he ain't took away. (*Joe Turner's* 240-41)

This characterization connects Selig more with Joe Turner. The economic system represented by Selig, a system that exploits and excludes blacks, is one that thrives on white oppression. He is the representative of those economic forces, which not only exploit blacks but also deny them their intrinsic worth as humans. Though these forces may not be self-consciously evil, the injury they inflict through indifferent exploitation resembles that inflicted by Joe Turner's direct oppression. Selig cannot find the Shiny Man because neither he nor the economic system he represents is able to recognize African-Americans as persons or individuals. The Shiny Man's spiritual or inner shine cannot be discovered materialistically. Bynum uses Selig to find the Shiny Man, but he does not rely on him.

Having found their song, the song of self-sufficiency, and accepting the responsibility for their own presence in the world, Loomis and Bynum are free. The fact that they are free, however, poses a major dilemma, for we are left to wonder if blacks will ever move past the shadow of slavery. Seth's condition is a case in point. Seth is a black man who was born and brought up in the North. He is a man of position in Pittsburgh. He is a skilled craftsman and has stability that none of the other black characters have. This stability becomes more apparent when we observe it against the dislocated lives of those around him. His long uninterrupted conjugal life is surrounded by broken relationships, and his trade gives him a solidity that other wandering blacks lack. Indeed, Seth is the most socially established of Wilson's characters: "The fact that he [Seth] owns the boardinghouse and that he is a craftsman, that he has a skill other than farming, sets him apart from the other characters," says Wilson ("Interview with Kim Powers" 373). Despite this financial security, he too is vulnerable to a white society bent on extracting what it can from him and limiting his economic opportunities. He says, "[Whites] want me to sign over the house to borrow five hundred dollars. . . . Sign it over to them and then I won't have nothing" (*Joe Turner's* 243). While he has a firm sense of his social role as

a black northern businessman, he knows this security is tenuous; it has to be reaffirmed every day. Working almost twenty-four hours a day is not enough. He lags economically behind even those whites who have recently come to the city from all over the world. He is keenly aware of the predicaments of blacks in the North. He, therefore, knows what is going to happen to those who are still unaware of their destiny and who have arrived here with "their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, . . ." (*Joe Turner's* 203). Mark his snort of disgust at their innocence: "niggers drop everything and head North looking for freedom. . . . Niggers coming up here from the backwoods . . . coming up here from the country carrying Bibles and guitars looking for freedom. They got a rude awakening" (*Joe Turner's* 209). If life is so difficult for a black man born and raised in the city, it will be virtually devastating for the innocent blacks who are still in the streets with the hope to survive in an "urban jungle" (Pereira 58).

Jeremy Furlow is one such yokel who falls easy prey to city predators like the police, who have their own methods of clearing the overpopulated streets--rounding up blacks like cattle, arresting them, and herding them off the streets. At the work place, blacks are bullied unmercifully into giving white men some part of their salary to hold on to their jobs.

In case of resistance, they are fired. Jeremy is fired from his job because he will not yield to a white extortionist. But then Molly tells him ironically that it will be easy to get his job back if he returns the next day and signs up again, for no one will recognize him as the man who was fired the day before. To urban whites, blacks are just an anonymous herd of faceless people, as indistinguishable from one another as animals in a field. Jeremy is also in continual danger of being dispossessed of his song.

The female characters in the play are in search of permanent relationships and stability in their life. Mattie wants to settle down, to link her fate with one man in a lasting relationship. Though the setbacks in her search for companionship have dimmed her optimism, they have not shaken her faith in the possibility of love. On Bynum's advice, she is willing to take yet another chance on love, even though Jeremy is not exactly her kindred spirit. Her interest peaks when she learns that he is a guitar player--the blues may be just what her bruised spirits need, and if this man can bring the blues to her she will welcome him, most heartily. But Mattie and Jeremy are not traveling in the same direction. They are essentially different, with different sensibilities and different goals. Mattie wants to settle down, but Jeremy has to travel. Bynum

immediately senses this incompatibility. He knows that they are not meant to be together. When Jeremy announces that Mattie is going to move in with him, Bynum thinks she could be making a mistake. And Jeremy drops Mattie the minute a more attractive woman, Molly Cunningham, comes along. Mattie's need for a man and a family brings her into contact with Loomis. Though she is not, ultimately, attractive to Jeremy, she is to Loomis. "In some ways," as Pereira says, "Mattie and Loomis are kindred spirits embarked on similar pilgrimages" (76). Mattie's search for her husband has become, under Bynum's gentle prodding, a search for a man who, in Bertha's words, has "some understanding and [is] willing to work with that understanding to come to the best he can" (*Joe Turner's* 272). In other words, Mattie looks for a man not like Jeremy who is needed to go out and garner some more life experiences, but a man who has discovered himself. Loomis, on his part, is searching for his wife, but he sees in Mattie someone who could fill the empty spaces in his life. "As each of them gropes toward a new identity," Pereira further says, "they appear to be headed in the same direction. But they must first take that final step toward self-empowerment; they have to affirm their individual identities separately before beginning a journey together . . ." (76).

Like Mattie, the twenty-six-year old Molly is lonely, but there the similarity ends. Where Mattie wants a family to support her, Molly takes the family as a burden, which she claims killed her mother. Molly's independent spirit revolts against all the things Mattie holds dear. She too is the product of a broken relationship. Her experience has taught her not to trust anybody "but the good Lord above, and [her] mamma" (*Joe Turner's* 260). Her search for self-authentication has made her undertake a journey away from the South. Jeremy finds her nomadic spirit attractive and appreciates her self-assertiveness. She is a free soul, quite able to take care of herself, certainly not one of the desperate women Jeremy sought to avoid. She can well be the companion of the itinerant bluesman. Both are looking for companionship but neither wants to be tied to one place. So they join the throngs that wander along the roads and byways from town to town, "seeking . . . a new identity as free men [and women] of definite and sincere worth" (*Joe Turner's* 203).

If Mattie and Molly are in search of their own songs, a sense of spiritual and emotional stability in their lives, albeit along different paths, Bertha seems to have found what she wants out of life. A dedicated, hardworking, boundless source of maternal strength, sustenance, and sage advice, she is

the stereotypical nurturing black matriarch. Seth is the most prosperous black man in the play, and his prosperity is shown to be linked to the self-sacrifice and fortitude of his wife. Bertha is thus made the alpha and omega for the black man's search for selfhood. She derives her strength from two religious traditions perfectly synthesized in her soul. On the same Sunday morning she goes to church like a good Christian and then comes home to sprinkle salt all over the house as a protection against evil spirits, or line up pennies across the threshold to keep witches at bay. Having embraced Christianity, she still remains "connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood's memory" (*Joe Turner's* 283) to a tradition and culture whose descendant she is. It is from these traditional customs that she fashions an elixir for all sadness--laughter resonates even amid the torments.

Zonia has a significant role in the play. As voiced by a child on the verge of adolescence, her unique rendition of the blues is encoded with or "constitutes" what Baker Jr. calls "the amalgam" of purposes of the blues. Her songs represent the "always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World" (*Blues* 5). She acts as her father's guide in his interaction with other characters; and, in turn, she serves them as a guide into her father's

enigmatic character. Her blues is emblematic of her relationship with her father, for she must accompany him on his travels in search of her mother. And at the same time, it affords her a certain distance from her trouble and thereby offers her a liberating catharsis.

Martha is a devoted Christian. While her husband demonstrates his disavowal by challenging and withdrawing from Christianity, she is more involved with the church. After waiting years for her husband to return, she was forced to give him up for dead. The Evangelist church helped her pick up the pieces of her life, and she owes it allegiance. Finally, when she meets her husband, both of them realize that their lives are different now, that there is no compelling bond between them anymore. They say goodbye to each other. But the goodbye is also a reconciliation, because it is the moment of new displacement that will lead to self-affirmation and survival. For Martha, it is the culmination of her search: she makes her peace with her husband and is reunited with her daughter. For Loomis, it is the moment of closing the book on his earlier life and of moving toward a new future.

Most of the female characters in the play, as Bogumil observes, "represent the dissolution of a myth--a simplified, traditional . . . portrait of women as merely doting mothers

. . ." (*Understanding* 72). Simply stated, each woman is psychologically more complex than the creatures that dwell within such a mythic construct. Each woman's interaction with the "Joe Turners," as a suffering African-American, leads her to discover for herself a song that sustains her in the face of odds.

Thus, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* addresses the issues of uprooted African-Americans, who, as a culture, have been "enslaved" both physically and psychologically. But at the same time, it explores how they struggle to rise above the non-human status imposed upon them by reclaiming the past and bringing it into the present. To search for this past, and to accept it, is life's most important journey, for only through this journey can one achieve an understanding of oneself and survive better as a human being.