

Handout - August Wilson, “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,” Excerpt 1

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson was born on April 27, 1945, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The son of bi-racial parents, Wilson’s family regularly experienced racial animosity upon moving to a largely white neighborhood in Pittsburgh, forcing them to move to different houses. At fifteen, one of Wilson’s teachers falsely accused him of plagiarism. In response, he walked out of school and pursued studies independently at the nearby library, while working odd jobs to support his family.

*As a young adult, Wilson began publishing poetry, and in 1968 he became the cofounder and director of Black Horizons Theatre in Pittsburgh, where his first play, *Recycling*, premiered. From there he spent much of his career creating The Century Cycle, a series of ten plays mostly set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh where Wilson was born. Each play is set in a different decade, with recurring characters appearing or being referenced across multiple plays.*

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, the play excerpted below, represents the decade of the 1910s in The Century Cycle. The play takes place in a boarding house run by Seth Holly and his wife Bertha. It chronicles the lives of the residents of the Holly’s boarding house. Issues of migration, ongoing racial injustice, and the difficulty of locating loved ones after the end of slavery are primary themes throughout the play.

Act One, Scene One

(In this scene, Boardinghouse tenants Rutherford Selig and Bynum Walker discuss their experiences finding and reuniting people separated by slavery or other means.)

BERTHA: Sit on down there, Selig. Get you a cup of coffee and a biscuit.

BYNUM: Where you coming from this time?

SELIG: I been upriver. All along the Monongahela. Past Ranking and all up around Little Washington.

BYNUM: Did you find anybody?

SELIG: I found Sadie Jackson up in Braddock. Her mother’s staying down here in Scotchbottom say she hadn’t heard from her and she didn’t know where she was at. I found her up in Braddock on Enoch Street. She bought a frying pan from me.

BYNUM: You around here finding everybody how come you ain’t found my shiny man.

SELIG: The only shiny man I saw was the Nigras working on the road gang with the sweat glistening on them.



BYNUM: Naw, you'd be able to tell this fellow. He shine like new money.

SELIG: Well, I done told you I can't find nobody without a name.

BERTHA: Here go one of these got biscuits, Selig.

BYNUM: This fellow don't have no name. I call him John 'cause it was up around Johnstown where I seen him. I ain't even so sure he's one special fellow. He could be anybody shining.

SELIG: Well, what's he look like besides being shiny? There's lots of shiny Nigras.

BYNUM: He's just a man I seen out on the road. He ain't had no special look. Just a man walking toward me on the road. He come up and asked me which way the road went. I told him everything I knew about the road, where it went and all, and he asked me did I have anything to eat 'cause he was hungry. Say he ain't had nothing to eat in three days. Well, I never be out there on the road without a piece of dried meat. Or an orange or an apple. So I give this fellow an orange. He take and eat that orange and told me to come and go along the road a little ways with him, that he had something he wanted to show me.

We walked on a bit and it's getting kind of far from where I met him when it come up on me all of a sudden, we wasn't going the way he had come from, we was going back my way. Since he said he ain't knew nothing about the road, I asked him about this. He say he had a voice inside him telling him which way to go and if I come and go along with him he was gonna show me the Secret of Life. Quite naturally I followed him. A fellow that's gonna show you the Secret of Life ain't to be taken lightly. We get near this bend in the road. . .

(Seth enters with an assortment of pots.)

SETH: I got six here, Selig.

SELIG: Wait a minute, Seth. Bynum's telling me about the secret of life. Go ahead, Bynum, I wanna hear this.

(Seth sets the pots down and exits out the back.)

BYNUM: We get near this bend in the road and he told me to hold out my hands. Then he rubbed them together with his and I looked down and see they got blood on them. Told me to take and rub it all over me. . .say that was a way of cleaning myself. Then we went around the bend in that road. Got around that bend and it seem like all of a sudden we ain't in the same place. Turn around that bend and everything look like it was twice as big as it was. The trees and everything bigger than life! Sparrows big as eagles! I turned around to look at this fellow and he had this light coming out of him. I had to cover up my eyes to keep from being blinded. He shining until all the light seemed like it seeped out of him and then he was gone and I was by myself in this strange place where everything was bigger than life.

I wandered around there looking for that road, trying to find my way back from this big place. . . .and I looked over and seen my daddy standing there. He was the same size he always was, except for his hands and his mouth. He had a great big old mouth that look like it took up his whole face and his hands were as big as hams. Look like they was too big to carry around. 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 a song. Then he carried me further into this big place until we come to this ocean. Then he showed me something I ain't go words to tell you. But if you stand to witness it, you done seen something there. I stayed in that place a while 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 Show 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. I came out to where everything was its own size and I had my song. I had the Binding Song. I choose that song because that's what I seen most when I was traveling. . . .people walking away and leaving one another. So I takes the power of my song and binds them together.

(Seth enters from the yard carrying cabbages and tomatoes.)

Been binding people ever since. That's why they call me Bynum. Just like glue I sticks people together.

SETH: Maybe they ain't supposed to be stuck sometimes. You ever think of that?

BYNUM: Oh, I don't do it lightly. It cost me a piece of myself every time I do. I'm a Binder of What Clings. You got to find out if they cling first. You can't bind what don't cling.

SELIG: Well, how is that the Secret of Life? I thought you said he was gonna show you the secret of life. That's what I'm waiting to find out.

BYNUM: Oh, he showed me all right. But you still got to figure it out. Can't nobody figure it out for you. You got to come to it on your own. That's why I'm looking for the shiny man.

SELIG: Well, I'll keep my eye out for him. What you got there, Seth?

Source: August Wilson, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone"

Discussion Questions:

1. How would you describe the Shiny Man in Bynum's story? How did the Shiny Man affect Bynum's life?
2. What role does personal choice play in this story? How did Bynum's choices propel the story further?
3. Why might the crossroads be a good place for Bynum to meet the Shiny Man?
4. Would you describe Bynum's encounter on the crossroads as positive, negative, or neutral. Why?