



**The Religious Tension between  
Christianity and African Religion  
in August Wilson's Joe Turner's  
Come and Gone**

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## Abstract

The religious tension in August Wilson play Joe Turner's Come and Gone is a dominant theme of the play as the playwright documented this tension in his play Joe Turner's Come and Gone. Wilson attempted through this depiction of religious tension to display how the characters of the play suffered as a result of this struggle. Within the text of the play we have the Shiny man and Manha that represented Christianity as well as the story of Juba, rituals' and ghosts which represented the African Traditional Religion. This study aims to prove that Wilson succeeded in linking the doctrines of the past and present through this depiction of religious tension in the play. The study also gave a critical analysis to the main events of the play that assisted the playwright to deliver his message for the reader. Wilson dealt with the original African rituals through black rituals Bynum who became the joint point between the black doctrines of the past and present.

**Keywords: African American, American society, Christianity, Religious Tension.**

## 1. Introduction

This paper investigates religious aspects in the American Society in the 20th century. The focus of research will be mainly on the religious struggle between the religion of the whites and Black that means the struggle between the African Religion and Christianity in the play of August Wilson Joe Turner's Come and Gone. The researcher has concentrated on religion as being considered a significant part in societies that could influence the whole life of all cultures including all ethnicities and colors. This paper will be conducted through discussing the selected play (Joe Turner's Come and Gone) By August Wilson. In this paper will examine the effects of religions on the American Society of the 20th century, mainly on the works of August Wilson. This paper studies Wilson's dream of dealing with the original African rituals through black rituals. It has been arranged to divide this paper into sections, by presenting the methodology that has been adopted, then, it will deal with the impact of religion on the lives of both Blacks and Whites, in America in the 20th century. Through this paper, there will be a summary of the selected play, focusing on religion aspects of the American Society. Then, the paper will investigate the vision and attitudes of August Wilson through the characters he had created in his play: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. It is hoped that this display and analysis the concerned play as well as the vision of the playwright will be a suitable base for future research works so as to go more profoundly with more details about the discussed subject. It has also been found that African traditional religious and culture should be studied widely because they are formed out of the basis for the opportunity of meaningful and religious negotiation among the black and white people.

## 2.Importance and method of the study

The major concern of researcher is to analyze August Wilson's play Joe Turner's Come and Gone, which has used the issue of the Christianity Vs. African Traditional Religion as being considered a significant aspect in any society, that could impact on the whole life of all Cultures including all ethnicities and colors. There have been several steps that the researcher has followed. First, the researcher has attempted to interpret and explain. Second, the researcher applies the descriptive analytical approach Supported by data and information collected from articles, research drama and other documents, as references relied on, in this work, side by side with the researcher's own previous experience and reading of the selected playwright, and the analysis of the selected play.

## 3.The role of religion in the American society

In the postcolonial period, there had been an African Traditional Religion, and different beliefs and tradition based on ethnical groups. Furthermore, African Traditional Religion didn't not have an origin or a historical movement and that his beliefs amongst the different communities differ largely. "Postcolonial is understood as the study of the interactions among European nation and societies colonized in the modern period (Bahri 1996:1). Post colonialism can also be defined as a method in which race, ethnicity, culture and human identity are represented in the modern era, after many colonized countries gained their independence (Chousein, 2013:13).

It had been August's concern in social reforms and ethnical problems. According to Du Bois, The Whites want to learn to deal with the reality that Christianity is a non-Western religion in Africa. It seeks to explain how the knowledge of a colonized people has been adopted against them in the service of the advantages of the colonizer and how knowledge of the world is produced in relations between the strong and the poor. "Post-colonial theory, also encourages the creative resistance of the colonized to the colonizer". (Bahri 1996:1). Therefore in post-colonialism, the study of religion and religious discourse is an endeavor to explain the possibilities and limitations of religion and religious impact on authors. As equal partners, it is

also an attempt to approach interreligious dialogue, "unlike during the colonial period of Christianity considered AIR as inferior religion and members of interreligious partners" (Isomae 2006:85).

Characters struggle with their conceptions of faith and God in August Wilson's plays. Wilson creates a distinction between the position of Christianity and the traditional religion of Africa. One religion's acceptance solves the dilemma. Wilson made a distinction between Christianity's place and the traditional religion of Africa. Acceptance in one religion solves the problem. Wilson represents these two polarized images reflecting the tenets of Christianity and the African Traditional Religion. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* includes a story of a Shiny Man, rituals, ghosts, a juba, and a self-inflicted cutting, all of which are connected to the tenets of ATR, whereas characters of the Shiny Man and Martha represent Christianity.

This selected play is about the migration and dispersal of a race and culture, searching for an identity and home" (BRANTLEY,2009:3). Throughout the Migration of the 1910s when Blacks moved in huge numbers from the South to the Northern industrial cities, looking for new jobs, new lives and new start: "Its characters, embodied by strong ensembles in town, instead of fancy figures in an allegory, seem reassuringly knowable. This is real, describing supernatural visions such as bones walking from the ocean."( BRANTLEY, 2009:5) .

#### 4. Religious Tensions within the text of the play

This section focuses on the religious *tension in the play of August Joe Turner's Come and Gone. A Play in Two Acts* so as to come up with expressions and terms used by the author through his characters, these that express aspects of Christianity Vs. African Traditional Religion among the different characters, in the first four scenes in Act one , and in the five scenes in act two .*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is happend in the second decade of the 20th century and deals with the conflicts of racism, discrimination and religious issues. Wilson has depicted four spiritual stages for his characters: those who are detached from spirituality, those who admit to Christianity and the "white motifs" that underpin it, those who reject Christianity looking for a bottomless spirituality, and those who have rewired to and represent African Traditional Religion. These phases are better portrayed by the characters: Levee, Toledo, Loomis, and Bynum. Wilson's analysis of the effort to realize that one's soul is even adrift begins with Levee and Toledo, and Loomis and Bynum add the full circle of awareness to the reconnection to ATR. The way religion produced images that mirrored the attitudes of traditional African religion was described by Wilson. He asserted the role of certain characters in the play, such as the Shiny Man and Martha, who embodied Christianity, in addition to the tale of Juba, rituals and ghosts reflecting the African Traditional Religion. According to August Wilson (1989):

"Seth complains to Bertha about the unusual spiritual practices of Bynum. Bertha advises Seth to leave him be, as nobody is bothering him. Seth then has a monologue on the poor state in which the liberated slaves are after moving up north" (Wilson, 1989:44).

The dramatist tries to show transfer the idea of suffering, and the miserable life of the black people, and there is a hint here about some spiritual behaviors and they become strange for those characters who have forgotten their original spiritual activities It could be seen that the concept of color discrimination is raised clearly and the black African American are naïve and they have only been promised to get work in the North, but those promises have never been fulfilled, and it is shown that the Black African American still believe in the existence of spirits and ghosts. "Loomis has a horrific vision of bones walking on the ocean's surface in the midst of insulting the Holy Spirit (which can be used as a renunciation of Christianity) (Stephanie Larkin, 2013, p.4).

The vision of people with bones is transformative. Wilson has described the way religion created images that mirrored the attitudes of traditional African religion. In addition to the tale of Juba, rituals and ghosts standing for the African Traditional Religion, he asserted the role of some characters in the play such as the Shiny Man and Martha who embodied Christianity. This is obvious in the next scene when Jeremy asked Mattie to stay with him because he is alone:

"Jeremy intervenes and says that to relieve both of their depression, Mattie remains with him. Reuben explains the strange tendencies of Bynum to Zonia and tells her a story about his friend Eugene, who used to sell Bynum pigeons so that he could use their blood in his rituals" (Wilson, 1989:55).

The old traditional religion is still following those black people in their behaviors and their mind and the use of the blood of the pigeons is a symbol of believing in strange spirits and a kind of magic derived from ancient traditional religion.

Juba is a symbol of old traditional religion, and it could be noticed that Loomis prevents them from singing and he starts hallucinating as a result of hearing old traditional religious songs, it is a reference to belonging to old traditions and a kind of believing in the power of spirits and ghosts and in Christianity these rituals are

denied. In the next scene the characters of the play attempted to adjust themselves to the religious tension in the American society so as not to be a victim of this struggle:

“Bynum, Molly and Mattie are left in the kitchen debating how children always fall in the footsteps of their parents. Molly insists that she is never going to pursue the direction of her father and that she is still going to be a strong, independent woman. Jeremy returns from work to the house and reveals to Seth that he would not give 50 cents to a white foreman to retain his job, so he was fired” (Wilson, 1989:667).

Raising the racial discrimination issues and economic problems like corruption of the public employees through their acceptance of bribery.

According to Stephanie Larkin (2013)

“Loomis lost his religion when Turner kidnapped him, depriving him of his family and his freedom. Loomis now understands the conspiracy between faith and the oppressive state and cannot bring himself to celebrate the white man’s God, who has requested such sacrifices of him” (Larkin,2013: 6)

Bynum discloses that he had known that Loomis had been stripped away by Joe Turner and he decided to find his song in order to begin his life again. Loomis tells Bynum and Seth his story, telling them that when trying to preach to some African Americans who are gambling, Joe Turner's men took him. The song of bringing people together possesses Bynum:

“This can be seen as Wilson’s attempt to posit a holistic view of life, implying thereby a link between individual spirituality and collective rebuilding the spiritual collective can be seen as a primary objective of retention and a means to heal oneself in terms of spirituality and identity” (Stephanie Larkin, 2013: 5).

He was in Turner's chain gang for seven years, surviving only by thinking about his wife and daughter. He tells them that seven years later, he came home to find out that his wife had vanished and that his daughter was living with her grandmother.

Bynum who has become the bridge between the black principles of the past and present in addition the characters' roles in demonstrating Christianity and the African Traditional Religion Bertha reassures Mattie that in life she can find what she desires and wishes and that she only has to be patient. Loomis told Mattie that he realized that she was viewing him and that he found her good-looking. When the requisite number of staff had been drawn into the circle, the bones would roll happily. The law would collapse on the bad evils at that point, capture many of them who were required for work, try them in court for gaming, and then turn the criminals over to Joe Turner. Perhaps that night, among the dusky belles, there will be crying and wailing. If one of them was likely to ask a neighbor what the nice good guy had been, and she was likely to receive a pat answer, they would tell me that Joe Turner had come and gone.

Bertha tells Mattie that love and laughter are what she wants in life, which they are all starting to do. Loomis goes into a rage, taking a knife out of it. He denounces his past as a Christian and slashes his chest. Having found his music, the song of self-sufficiency, completely reborn, cleansed and breathed, free from any burden other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh, having accepted responsibility for his own world presence. He is free to soar above the surroundings that have weighted and forced his mind into alarming contractions. He leaves and the play ends with Bynum shouting Herald Loomis, you shine! You shine like new gold. As the catalyst, Martha recites lines from the Bible and accuses Loomis of turning to the devil, unlike the rejection of a shallow philosophical claim by the Levee. "Loomis shuns a deeper threat of "slavery" by Christians. He rants that he sees Christ standing with a whip like a slave master, while niggers swim in a sea of cotton “(Stephanie Larkin, 2013, p.3).

### 5. Racial Discrimination as a result of Religious tensions

While the promise of employment and independence seems to exist in the North, it seems to be as racially segregated as the South. Jeremy runs into the most discriminative, though the characters have been influenced by the influences of intolerance. Discrimination had affected the residents of the boardinghouse, and more exploitation had been seen. Selig learned that like the foreman, white police officers take Jeremy's money, and Selig is still trying to get Seth's money at a reasonable price. While the Civil War was over, African Americans were still viewed as artifacts rather than human beings. There have been two beliefs underlying the veneration of the dead: the survival of the individual after death and the interchange of connections between the living and the dead. Through his depiction of his characters, August Wilson fostered spirituality: Deity or belief system in his plays. Via his male protagonists, Wilson discovers the tension between traditional African faith and Christianity. The protagonist has been marginalized in Christianity in August Wilson's Joe Turner's come and Gone, and seeks a deeper spiritual connection and liberation through African Traditional Religion. In order to give the African American male some sort of vice, the African American playwright

August Wilson began writing plays. Wilson's cycle provides the world with an inside view of the African American race's wars and hardships for the entire twentieth century.

The male characters of Wilson battle for identity, economic injustice, exploitation, and religion for the most part. Wilson has put his protagonists between African Traditional Religion and Christianity's two philosophies. The male characters are required to choose either the doctrines of African Traditional Religion or Christianity to achieve a purpose or a sense of reconciliation (Joe Turner's come and Gone).

Wilson highlights this struggle due to the fact that African Americans have been compelled to reject their ancestors' religion in order that they could assimilate into American society. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, much of the show is related to the characters' faith and religious characteristics. Bynum conducts what the characters mention as voodoo operations in the play. He was stated at the beginning of the play as pouring the blood of the pigeons, various spells of good luck and unorthodox medicines. And when Loomis becomes obsessed at the end of the act by the Holy Spirit, one wants some impressive portrayals. The juba song that required singing and dancing like Africans, along with this possession, with Seth playing harmonica, Bynum singing and drumming, and Jeremy playing guitar, (Keller, 2001 P. 472).

The structure of the play matches the genre of realism in that it depicts everyday life on stage, performing daily activities; this song is a way for African Americans to be related to each other and continue their bond with their heritage. The blues music era was known to have greatly influenced Wilson:

“The problem at the forefront of racial emancipation has always been the battle to find an African-American religious identity. In terms of the characters of August Wilson in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, he portrays them as being both liberated and oppressed in their search for spiritual connection” (Larkin, 2013:1).

## Conclusion

Wilson's play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* stands for identity, immigration, racial discernment, and Religion sides of the American Society. These connotations August Wilson inclines to follow in many of his plays. Joe Turner is the idea of identity and the display on the author to the different religious trends. As shown in the two acts: those who still keep their own religious traditions, those who condemn the old, and who accepts the new religious traditions and beliefs and some who are lost among these interactions and engagement.

Because of the Civil War, African Americans were forced to fight so that they could find an identity and to keep their own old religious traditions and rituals. And when looking deeply at the characters of Wilson in this play, it could be noticed by readers that they have been selected as liberated or oppressed. The main focus of the author is that: characters are looking for religious or spiritual links to be belonging to, and to get all their equal rights and existence.

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