



AUGUST WILSON'S
JOE TURNER'S
COME AND GONE

DIRECTED BY GREGG T. DANIEL

OCTOBER 12-NOVEMBER 9, 2025



Dear School Partner,

Welcome to A Noise Within Theatre! We are thrilled to welcome you to the 2025-26 season—a season that we like to call **Songs from the Volcano**—featuring timeless stories bursting with upheaval, transformation, and the embers that push us to grow. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, a mysterious man and his child arrive at a boarding house, unsettling the other residents and posing the essential question: *how can we come together in community to discover ourselves fully and heal our lingering wounds?*

In this study guide, you will find articles, classroom activities, behind-the-scenes interviews, and other exciting materials, all crafted to align with the Common Core and the California VAPA Standards. This study guide can be enjoyed by teachers and students alike, our hope being that teachers and students enjoy it together!

We offer this study guide as a free resource for contextualizing the show and drawing parallels with our modern world, and you can find guides from our past seasons available for download on our website.

We hope this study guide will prepare you to enjoy the show to its fullest potential and to create a lasting memory of a fantastic day at the theatre. We are happy to have you!

Warmly,

A Noise Within Education



Table of Contents

4	Meet the Characters
5	Play Synopsis
7	About the Author: August Wilson
9	About the Cycle: The American Century Cycle
10	Themes and Motifs
13	Essay: PITTSBURGH AND THE GREAT MIGRATION: "HISTORY SPEAKS"
16	Essay: LEARNING TO SING IN <i>JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE</i>
18	Classroom Activity: <i>Joe Turner</i> & Script Analysis
20	Classroom Activity: Map the Great Migration
21	Discussion Questions
22	Bonus Material

Credits

Education Director and Editor	Lea Marie Madda
Author	Dr. Miranda Johnson-Haddad
Contributor	Julia Gonzalez
Production Photography	Daniel Reichert
Graphic Design	Teresa Meza

Joe Turner's Come and Gone

Seth Holly

The owner of a boarding house in Pittsburgh's Hill District. A direct and straightforward man who is often impatient with others.

Bertha Holly

Seth's wife. A kind, sensible woman who balances Seth's impulsive side.



Bynum Walker

A "conjure man" and the most spiritually attuned character in the play.

Rutherford Selig

A trader and so-called "people finder." He is the only white character.

Herald Loomis

A mysterious stranger who arrives at the boarding house. He is searching for his wife.

Martha Loomis Pentecost

Herald's wife and Zonia's mother.



Zonia Loomis

Herald's young daughter.

Jeremy Furlow

A young man living in the Hollys' boarding house.

Mattie Campbell

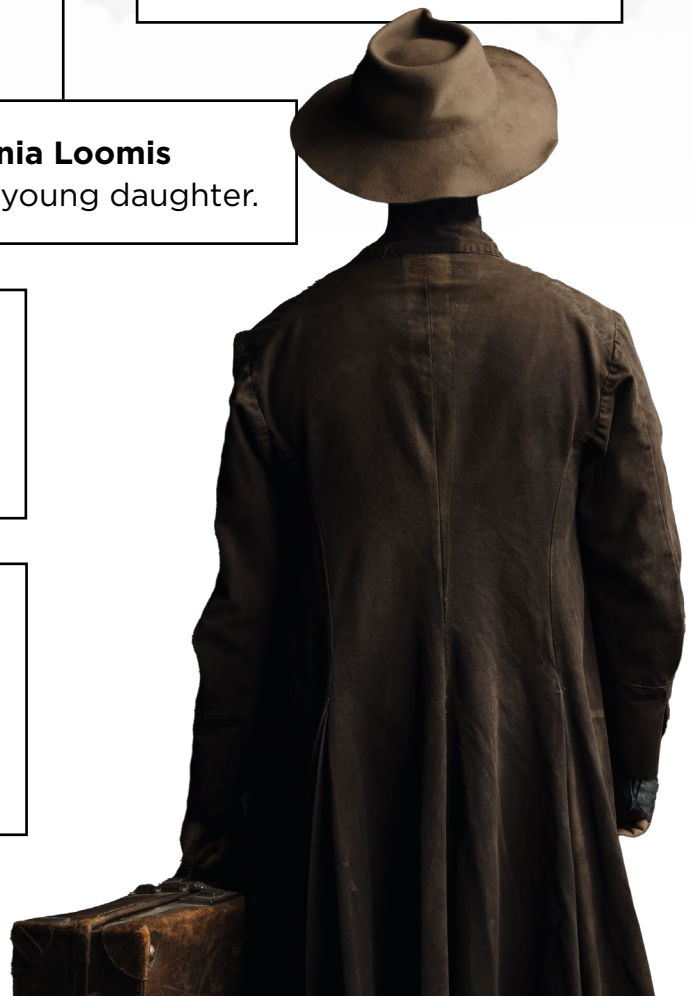
A lonely young woman who is always looking for love.

Molly Cunningham

An attractive, flirtatious young woman who is briefly a resident of the boarding house.

Reuben Mercer

A young boy who lives next door to the boarding house.



Play Synopsis

Setting: A boarding house in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, PA, in 1911.

It has been almost **fifty years since** President Lincoln issued the Executive Order known as **the Emancipation Proclamation** that eventually led to the abolishment of slavery. But the American South remains a dangerous place for Black Americans, where racism, kidnappings, and forced servitude were common.

Act 1:

The play opens in the kitchen of **the boarding house owned by Seth and Bertha Holly**. Boarding houses provided temporary accommodations for travelers and workers, along with a set number of meals each day. Seth is looking through the window at **Bynum Walker**, a permanent boarder and a “conjure man,” who is outside in the yard performing a ritual. Seth is irritated by Bynum’s rituals, but Bertha urges Seth to leave Bynum alone. Bynum enters, and the group is soon joined by **Rutherford Selig** (the only white character in the play), a trader and “people finder” who pays Seth to make some dustpans out of sheet metal and then departs. **Jeremy Furlow**, a young boarder, comes downstairs after a night on the town.



A boardinghouse in Philadelphia, 1915

Play Synopsis *continued*

A mysterious newcomer, **Herald Loomis**, a man who has “lost his song,” arrives with his young daughter, **Zonia**, looking for a room. Another newcomer, **Mattie Campbell**, comes to the boarding house looking for Bynum to help her bring her husband back, and Jeremy begins flirting with her. Zonia befriends **Reuben**, the young boy who lives next door.

One week later, Seth and Bertha are discussing Herald, who has been searching for his wife, **Martha Loomis Pentecost**. Rutherford Selig returns, and Herald asks him to help find Martha. The next day Jeremy tells Seth that Mattie will be moving into his room with him, but then another young woman, **Molly Cunningham**, arrives to inquire about a room, and Jeremy is immediately smitten with her. That evening, **some of the boarding house residents spontaneously begin a joyful song and dance called a “juba.”** Herald enters and is enraged by the juba, but then he begins speaking in tongues. In the midst of his ravings, **Herald suddenly becomes terrified by visions that only he can see.** As Bynum guides him through the visions, Herald becomes increasingly agitated and petrified, eventually collapsing on the floor as the scene ends.

Act 2:

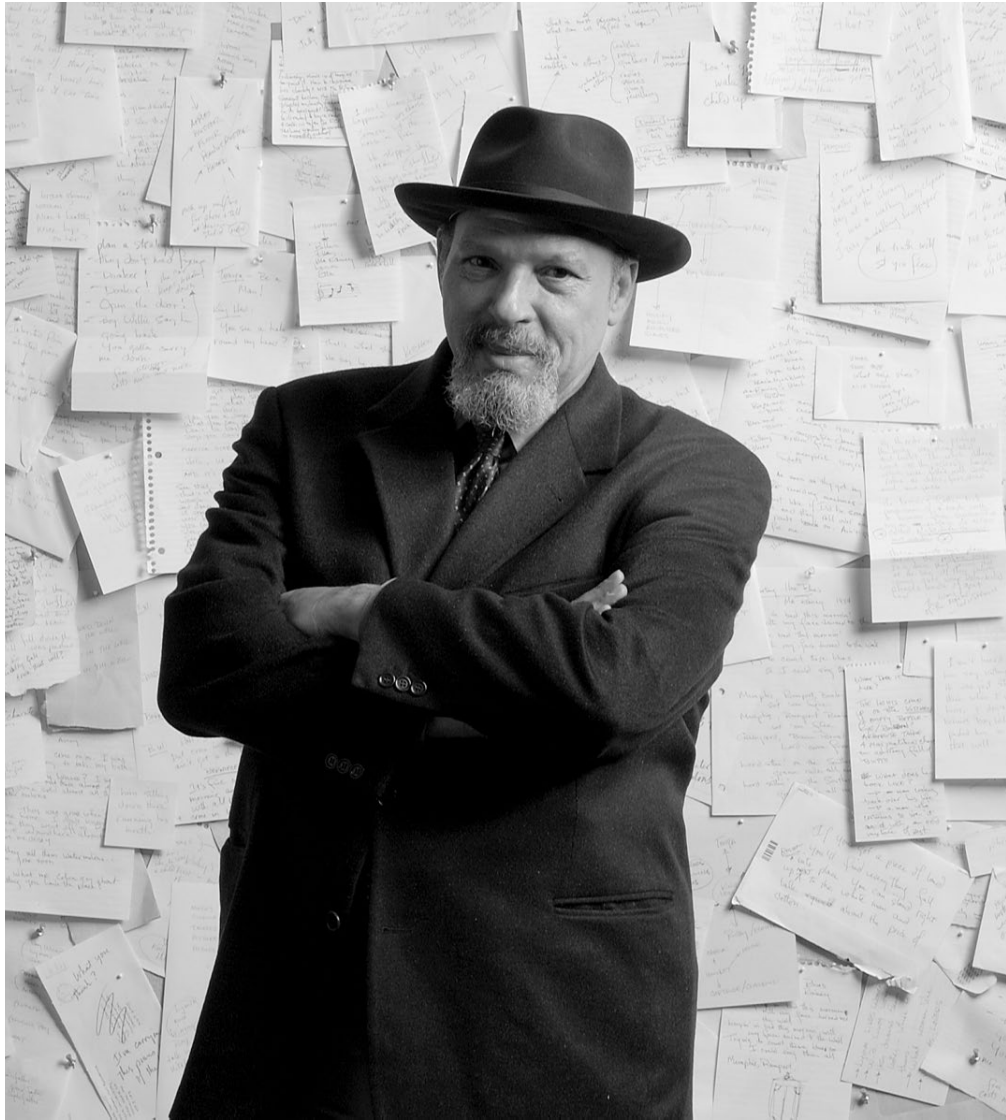
The next morning **Seth tells Bertha that he wants Herald to go**, but Bertha and Bynum tell him to leave Herald alone. Herald enters and tells Seth that he isn't leaving. Molly talks with Mattie and later with Jeremy. That evening Seth again confronts Herald, but with Bynum's encouragement **Herald is eventually able to share his story.** He tells how he was **kidnapped by the infamous Joe Turner and forced into hard manual labor** for seven years. When he finally escaped, he learned that his wife had disappeared years before, leaving Zonia with the girl's grandmother.

The next morning Bertha consoles Mattie, who is grieving because Jeremy has run off with Molly. Herald enters, and when he and Mattie find themselves alone, they share a tender though poignant moment. Early the following day, Zonia and Reuben talk together and confide in each other.

The following Saturday, Herald leaves with Zonia, but he soon returns and finds that **Rutherford Selig has arrived with Herald's long-lost wife, Martha.** Herald and Martha attempt to explain themselves, but they talk past each other as they struggle to connect. At the play's conclusion, Herald realizes that although he cannot make Martha understand the traumatic events that he has suffered, **he is nevertheless finally able to understand and accept that trauma himself**, and he regains his song at last.

August Wilson

August Wilson (1945-2005) was born Frederick August Kittel, Jr., in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, PA. He was the fourth of six children born to Daisy Wilson, a Black woman who cleaned houses for a living, and Frederick August Kittel, Sr., a German immigrant who was a baker and pastry chef. Wilson's parents divorced when he was young, and his father was almost entirely absent during Wilson's childhood. Wilson was raised by his mother, and he changed his name to August Wilson to honor her after his father died in 1965. Wilson and his mother remained very close until her death in 1983.



August Wilson, Playwright. 2011. Flickr.com.

Wilson attended three separate high schools, experiencing racism from his teachers and his fellow students at all three. He finally dropped out in 10th grade, after a teacher wrongly accused him of having plagiarized a paper that he had written on Napoleon I of France. Afraid of disappointing his mother, Wilson did not tell her that he had dropped out of school. Instead, he spent his days reading in various Pittsburgh public libraries, and he was essentially self-taught. He was influenced by the writings of many African American authors, including Malcolm X. In the 1960's Wilson became active in the arts community in Pittsburgh, and he began writing poetry and plays. Wilson said that his greatest influences were “the four B’s”: poet Amiri Baraka; artist Romare Bearden; author Jorge Luis Borges; and Blues music.

August Wilson is best known for his American Century Cycle, a collection of ten plays, each set during a different decade of the twentieth century, and all but one set in Pittsburgh's Hill District. Together the plays chronicle the Black experience in twentieth-century America and they form, in the words of drama critic John Lahr, “a kind of fever

August Wilson *continued*

chart of the unmooring trauma of slavery.” Wilson received numerous awards for his work, including two Pulitzer Prizes (for *The Piano Lesson* and *Fences*) and two Tony Awards.

Wilson died of liver cancer at the age of sixty, in 2005, shortly before the Broadway opening of *Radio Golf* (the final play in the cycle and the last play that Wilson wrote). After his death, the Virginia Theatre in New York City was renamed the August Wilson Theatre. **It was the first Broadway theatre to be named after a Black American.**

Wilson’s widow, Constanza Romero, has said that “August, while seeking out all the beauty, the struggle, the truths and wisdoms in African American Culture, mined the larger themes that make us all human.” Wilson’s ability to combine the specific with the universal has led many scholars, readers, and theatre professionals to compare him favorably with Shakespeare, whom Wilson greatly admired. Like Shakespeare, Wilson did not avoid tackling uncomfortable topics, nor was he afraid to confront himself and his own anxieties. Wilson’s advice to rising artists echoes a line spoken by Shakespeare’s Prospero, who says, in *The Tempest*, “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.” Similarly, Wilson urged young artists to “Confront the dark parts of yourself, and work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing.” August Wilson’s plays are a testament to his genius and his bravery, and they continue to sing to us today.



The American Century Cycle

In chronological order of the decade in which they are set, the plays in August Wilson's American Century Cycle are: *Gem of the Ocean* (1904), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1911), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1927), *The Piano Lesson* (1936), *Seven Guitars* (1948), *Fences* (1957), *Two Trains Running* (1969), *Jitney* (1977), *King Hedley II* (1985) and *Radio Golf* (1997).

Interestingly, Wilson wrote the plays in a completely different order. The first was *Jitney*, written in 1982 but set in the 1970's. It was followed by *Ma Rainey*, the only play that is set in Chicago. Moreover, Wilson did not explicitly set out to write a 10-play cycle (as American playwright Eugene O'Neill had attempted to do during the years 1935-1939, although he completed only two). The final two plays that Wilson wrote were the "bookend plays": *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf*. Wilson died of liver cancer in 2005, only a few months after completing *Radio Golf*.

Images clockwise: A Noise Within past productions. Gerald Rivers in *King Hedley II*. Nija Okoro & Evan Lewis Smith in *The Piano Lesson*. Veralyn Jones, Carolyn Ratteray, & Evan Lewis Smith in *Gem of the Ocean*. Photos by Craig Schwartz



Themes & Motifs

Joe Turner

A man who was half real, half myth. He was infamous for kidnapping Black men in the American South in the early 20th century and forcing them into chain gangs to work on the white-owned “farms” along the Mississippi River. His legend was loosely based on historical fact: Joe Turner (or Turney) was the brother of Peter Turney, the Governor of Tennessee from 1893-1897.

The “Joe Turner Blues”

The “Joe Turner Blues” was a song composed by the influential Blues musician W.C. Handy (1873-1958), who often referred to himself as the “Father of the Blues.” The song that Bynum Walker sings in Act Two, scene two of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is Handy’s song. In his autobiography, Handy describes the tactics of Joe Turner and how he illegally captured Black men for labor in the Jim Crow South.



W.C. Handy. 1949. Creative Commons

Boarding house

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, boarding houses began appearing all over the United States to provide temporary housing for traveling workers, both male and female. The need for temporary housing resulted in large part from enormous social changes such as the Industrial Revolution and the Great Migration. Boarding houses were often family-run, and they typically offered both room and “board” (a certain number of meals per day). Often boarding houses included communal areas, such as the kitchen, where boarders would gather for meals and companionship. As a result, boarding houses could foster a sense of togetherness among individuals who had to move frequently in search of employment, and who otherwise might have felt lonely and detached, and without any sense of belonging to a larger group.

Themes & Motifs *continued*

Creating Community

Most of the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* are residents of the boarding house owned by Seth and Bertha Holly. Some, like Bynum Walker, seem to be permanent boarders, while others, like Herald and Zonia Loomis, live there only briefly. But even for the characters who reside there just a short time, or who don't live there at all (like Rutherford Selig and Reuben Mercer), the boarding house functions as an important touchstone, for it plays a pivotal role in all their lives. No matter how long or short their stay, all of the characters who live at the Hollys' feel included in the community there, and they all benefit in various ways from sharing their wisdom with each other.

Identity

Themes of individual and group identity are central to *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and both are closely related to the theme of Community. With the notable exceptions of Bynum Walker and Bertha Holly, everyone who comes through the Hollys' door is struggling in various ways to understand themselves and to come to terms with who they are. Some, like Jeremy and Molly, are simply young, thoughtless, and a little lost. Others are searching for the wrong thing: Mattie is trying to fix her life by finding someone who will love her, when in reality she must learn to love herself. Seth Holly is frustrated that he can't get a loan to start his own metalworking business. Most striking is Herald Loomis, who believes that he is searching for his wife, but all the time he is actually struggling to accept both his own past and that of his ancestors. Only Bynum and Bertha are secure and comfortable with themselves and their circumstances, and consequently, they are able to offer guidance to others.

Spirituality

Questions about spirituality and religion, and the role that these beliefs play in the characters' lives, are among the most complex issues in the play. They are also the most contentious, as the various characters argue with each other about the superiority of their own belief system, whether it's some form of Christianity; a spiritual practice drawn from West Africa; or a combination of the two. Throughout his American Century Cycle, playwright August Wilson repeatedly explores the tension between Christianity—a religion that some white Americans imposed on enslaved people and then used as a tool of oppression—and the spiritual traditions that many enslaved people brought with them from Africa and then passed down to the next generations. In Wilson's plays, the characters who acknowledge and embody the wisdom of the ancestors tend to be the

Themes & Motifs *continued*

most at peace with themselves, even though acknowledging that wisdom inevitably requires acknowledging the trauma that the enslaved ancestors endured.

Pentecostalism and “speaking in tongues”

Pentecostalists believe that the Holy Spirit originally descended to humankind on the Christian holiday of Pentecost. Pentecostalists further believe that the Holy Spirit can and does descend every day to true believers. One of the hallmarks of Pentecostalism is “speaking in tongues.” Practitioners believe that when the Holy Spirit descends into a person, that individual often manifests the divine presence by speaking in a language that is unknown to themselves, but that others may be able to understand and interpret. In Act One, scene four, Herald is initially enraged when he sees the other residents engaging in a Juba that includes mention of the Holy Spirit, but then he himself begins “speaking in tongues.” Bynum appears able to interpret Herald’s words and guide him through the visions that he sees, but those visions seemingly originate in the experience of enslaved peoples being brought to America, rather than with the Holy Spirit of Christianity.

Juba

A ring, or circle, dance that also includes call-and-response singing, usually improvised. The origins of Juba may be African Djouba dances, or Caribbean Majumba, but American Juba was originally practiced by enslaved people in the South. The African-American composer Florence Price, who was the first Black woman to be recognized as a composer of symphonies and was also the first Black woman to have her compositions performed by a major American symphonic orchestra, included a “Juba Dance: *Allegro*” as the third movement of her Symphony Number 1.



Engraving depicting a Juba Dance. 1895. Creative Commons

Pittsburgh and The Great Migration: “History Speaks”

The city of Pittsburgh, in Western Pennsylvania, is strategically located at the intersection of three significant waterways: the Allegheny and the Monongahela Rivers, which merge in Pittsburgh to become the Ohio River. Many other cities in New York, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois are located along the shores of the Great Lakes. These advantageously located cities experienced economic boom times beginning in the early 1800’s, and they became preferred destinations



African American family moving from the South to Chicago, 1922. Creative Commons

during the Great Migration, a roughly sixty-year time period (from 1910-1970) when many Black Americans left the South to travel north in search of better economic and social opportunities. In her 2010 book *The Warmth of Other Suns*, journalist **Isabel Wilkerson describes the Great Migration as “the first mass act of independence by a people who were in bondage in this country for far longer than they have been free.”**

The twentieth-century American South was a place of terrible harshness for Black Americans. The infamous Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) had made “separate but equal” the law of the land and provided the legal basis for ongoing racial segregation in the South. Landmark Supreme Court decisions that sought to undo the destructive effects of *Plessy*, such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, and legislation such as the Civil Rights Act, were still decades away. “Jim Crow” laws—the state-sanctioned and state-enforced laws that maintained rigid segregation in all areas of society—as well as blatantly racist practices, such as voter suppression and redlining, combined to create nearly insurmountable odds for Black individuals struggling to thrive and prosper. Moreover, the American South was a violent and dangerous place for Black Americans, often fatally so. These dire circumstances, combined with the prosperous times and plentiful jobs that industry brought to many Northern and Midwestern American cities, led countless Black Southerners to leave their homes and travel north in search of a better life.

Pittsburgh and The Great Migration: “History Speaks” *continued*

Pittsburgh was one such destination city, and the Hill District, where August Wilson grew up and where nine of the ten plays of his American Century Cycle are set, became a vibrant center of Black American life during the early twentieth century. Initially the demographic groups that made up the Hill District included Irish and Italian immigrants and Eastern European Jews, as well as Black Americans. But the Black community grew the most rapidly, and the Hill District soon became an important cultural center, especially for Blues and jazz music, and Hill residents flocked to the many new clubs in the area, where famous musicians played to enthusiastic crowds.

The characters in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* represent some of the ways in which the Great Migration played out during the early decades of the 20th century, after slavery had been abolished but the Jim Crow South sought to evade the goals of Reconstruction. August Wilson’s plays often focus on the inherent tension between individuals who are at peace with themselves and with the legacy of the past, and those who struggle to achieve the inner serenity that comes only with acceptance. We see this tension play out between Seth Holly, who was born in the north of free Black parents, and Herald Loomis, who travels from the Deep South to Pittsburgh nearly crushed under the weight of grief and trauma from his years of indentured service that were no better than slavery. Seth is dismissive of the Black Americans who come north “from the backwoods...carrying Bibles and guitars looking for freedom” because he has never shared their confusion or their desperation, and he has no empathy for Herald’s struggles. Bynum Walker, however, who is the most spiritual character in the play, is able to guide Herald towards acceptance of the past—his own and those of his ancestors—which ultimately allows Herald to free himself from the burden of that past.

Pittsburgh and The Great Migration: “History Speaks” continued

In 2023, Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson summarized the Great Migration and the effects of Jim Crow in her dissenting opinion in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard* that ended the practice of affirmative action in college and university admissions. She concludes, “History speaks. In some form or another, it can be heard forever.” In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, we can hear history speaking in the characters’ words and in their songs, and especially in the struggles of Herald Loomis to “find his song.” August Wilson endeavored in his plays to fill in the gaps and erasures created not only by formal histories but even by some Black individuals themselves, such as Seth Holly, who has no patience for the ancestral and spiritual wisdom that Bynum Walker embodies and that Herald Loomis is so desperate to find. Wilson seems to suggest that in order to move forward, Black Americans first needed to acknowledge what slavery and its legacy had robbed them of in order to reclaim their inheritance and carry it forward with them as they traveled north into an uncertain future.



Denzel Washington. Creative Commons

INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT

Joe Turner’s Come And Gone

Denzel Washington has committed his production company to making all ten of the American Century Cycle plays into movies. So far three have been completed: *Fences* (starring Denzel Washington and Viola Davis), *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (starring Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman, in one of his last screen performances), and *The Piano Lesson*. Denzel Washington has announced that *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* will be the fourth movie; it is currently in development.

Learning to Sing in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

In his Introduction to *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, August Wilson sets the scene for the second play in his American Century Cycle: "From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into [Pittsburgh]. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods...they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing... Foreigners in a strange land... 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."

The idea that music and song are forms of power is a through-line in *Joe Turner* and in many of Wilson's other plays. The title of this play is a line from the W.C. Handy song "Joe Turner Blues," and the song that Bynum sings in Act Two, scene two is Handy's song. Wilson describes the struggles that many of the characters in *Joe Turner* experience through the metaphorical language of music, especially when he describes the main protagonist, Herald Loomis, as a man who is "unable to harmonize the forces that swirl around him." Bynum Walker, the "conjure man" and spiritual guide of the play, tells Herald that "when a man forgets his song he goes off in search of it," adding that he could tell that Herald had been kidnapped by Joe Turner "Cause you forgot how to sing your song."

When Herald says that he doesn't know what Joe Turner needed from him that Turner himself did not have, Bynum is ready with the answer: "That ain't hard to figure out. What he wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song to be his." But Bynum is equally quick to reassure Herald that the loss is temporary; he tells Herald that he still has his song, adding "You just forgot how to sing it." With these words, Bynum flips the narrative about who ultimately holds power in this new, post-slavery America, and in doing so,

JOE TURNER BLUES

W. C. HANDY



Learning to Sing in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* continued

Bynum reframes Herald's sense of loss into a feeling of empowerment. The idea that Bynum suggests here—that a racist white man (Joe Turner) who seems to have all the power is actually far poorer and weaker, in so many ways, than the Black Americans he oppresses—is one that August Wilson explores in other plays in the Century Cycle. Three plays in particular—*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (set in 1927 in Chicago), *The Piano Lesson* (set in Pittsburgh in 1936), and *Seven Guitars* (which also takes place in Pittsburgh, in 1948)—focus on white exploitation of Black jazz and Blues musicians. Wilson listed the Blues as one of “the four B’s” that influenced him the most, at one point writing that “I am the Blues.” The Blues came out of Black Americans’ horrific experiences of loss and pain at the hands of white enslavers and their descendants; yet paradoxically, by causing the intergenerational trauma that gave rise to the Blues, the oppressors created the very circumstances that led to the development of a musical form that was beyond their own abilities to invent, and which they coveted. We see this same idea at work in the 2025 movie *Sinners*, in the apt image of white vampires who seek to rob the Black musicians of their songs by killing them and stealing their souls. The power of the Blues is the power that comes from fearlessly acknowledging the past, and then defiantly refusing to be defined solely by the trauma of that past.



Michael B. Jordan, lead actor in *Sinners*.
Creative Commons

Reflecting upon these cultural moments of tension around music and song and who owns what, we can begin to appreciate more fully the significance of August Wilson's title, and we see that it can be read in two ways. In the traditional understanding of the song, Joe Turner has come and gone, taking something infinitely precious and valuable with him that is now lost, possibly forever. But alternatively, we can understand the title is telling us that yes, Joe Turner has come, but now he has also gone, so there is no longer any need to fear him. At the end of the play, Herald has found his song, just as Bynum predicted he would, and in August Wilson's words, it is “the song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected.” By naming and accepting his own story and that of his ancestors, with all the trauma that those stories embody, Herald has finally been able to set *himself* free.

Joe Turner and Script Analysis— Think like a Director!

ACTIVITY

Objective

Develop script analytical skills by closely investigating selections from *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Step 1: Read the following stage direction excerpt, then answer the questions below:

“LOOMIS picks up his hat from the table and turns to go. He falls back downstage center as if hit by an incredible force. BYNUM rushes to him. ZONIA starts for him, but MATTIE holds her back. The others watch in fascinated horror.” (Act 1 Sc. 5)

What is Loomis **physically** doing in this moment?

What do his movements suggest about his **emotional** state?

Why do you think Wilson chose to use stage directions, rather than dialogue or a monologue to tell this part of the story?

Joe Turner and Script Analysis— Think like a Director!

Step 2: Now it's your turn! Choose one of the following characters: Bynum, Martha, Jeremy, or Seth. Grab a script and find a stage direction involving that character in the play. Write it below and explain what it reveals about your selected character.

Stage Direction:

Explanation:

What is happening physically?

Emotionally?

What deeper meanings and/or character traits are revealed?

Map the Great Migration

ACTIVITY

Objective

Students will think critically about the Great Migration through mapping and research.

Step 2: Map It

Print out or trace a blank map of the United States. With a marker or push pins, identify five major cities in the South, such as Atlanta, and five major cities in the North, such as Pittsburgh.

Step 2: Group Work

Split students into five groups. Task each group with tracking the travel pattern between one city in the South and one city in the North, indicating that travel pattern by drawing a line on the map or connecting the push pins with string. Investigate the following questions, focusing on the years **1910-1940**:

- What is the distance between the two cities?
- What modes of transportation between the two cities were available at the time?
- What reasons might have compelled a Black American to leave the Southern city?
- What qualities made the Northern city seem appealing as a new home?
- What enduring issues might a Black American have encountered upon arrival in the Northern city?



Discussion Questions

Before the Show

1. How important do you think it is for us to **understand the past**? Do you believe that it's important even when that history is painful?
2. What do you know about **The Great Migration**? Why did so many Black Americans relocate from the South to the North in the first half of the 20th century?

After the Show

3. How do the residents at Seth and Bertha's boarding house form **an unexpected yet meaningful community**? What similarities exist among the residents and how do those similarities help bring them a sense of belonging?
4. How does Herald Loomis' journey in the play illustrate the process of **reclaiming identity** in the aftermath of trauma? What does it mean for Loomis to "find his song"?
5. Who is **Joe Turner**? What does his unseen presence symbolize?
6. How does the **legacy of slavery** and **systemic oppression** show up in the lives of the boarding house residents, even though the play takes place decades after the Emancipation Proclamation?
7. Throughout the play, August Wilson explores the tension between **Christianity** and **West African traditions of spirituality**. How does Herald Loomis experience this conflict, and how does it affect his journey towards healing?

Bonus Material

Want to go deeper into August Wilson and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*? Resident Dramaturg Miranda Johnson-Haddad has some suggestions:

Playwright August Wilson

- For an excellent overview of Wilson's life and works, including a detailed timeline, see: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/>
- See also The August Wilson African American Cultural Center, <https://awaacc.org/about/about-august/>
- August Wilson's childhood home was restored and opened in 2022 as an arts center (this site also provides a good historical overview of Wilson and the Hill District): [August Wilson House](#)
- Patti Hartigan's 2023 biography of August Wilson, *August Wilson: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023), although not authorized by the August Wilson estate, nevertheless contains extensive information, some of which is based on Hartigan's interviews with Wilson over many years. For an interview with Hartigan about the biography, see: <https://www.americantheatre.org/2023/08/16/how-patti-hartigan-learned-what-she-learned-about-august-wilson/> For a review of the biography, see: <https://www.americantheatre.org/2023/08/16/a-man-in-full-august-wilson-and-his-plays-in-all-their-complexity/>
- For a series of clips, including interviews, from a number of PBS broadcasts about Wilson and his plays, see: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-scenes-and-synposes-of-august-wilsons-10-play-cycle/3701/#:~:text=August%20Wilson's%20seminal%20cycle%20Of,Talent:%20Directed%20by%20Marion%20McClinton.>



Part of the August Wilson mural in Pittsburgh.

Bonus Material *continued*

The Great Migration

- To learn more about the Great Migration, see Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson's 2010 book *The Warmth of Other Suns*.
- For a succinct and powerful history of the legacy of racism, including Jim Crow and the Great Migration, see Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson's dissent in the affirmative action case *Students For Fair Admissions, Inc. vs. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, June 29, 2023: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf
- For the 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legalized "separate but equal" racial segregation, see: <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-plessy-ferguson#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Supreme%20Court%20changes,for%20the%20next%20fifty%20years.>

Blues Music and August Wilson

- For an interview with Kathryn Bostic, who wrote the score for many of Wilson's plays, see: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand/3706/#:~:text=KB:%20Blues%20music%20informed%20his,seamlessness%20between%20score%20and%20text.>
- For an outstanding documentary on the efforts of several young white men to find forgotten Blues singers during the summer of 1968 (including Skip James, whose lyrics Wilson includes as an epithet at the beginning of *The Piano Lesson*), see the 2016 documentary *Two Trains Runnin'*, produced and narrated by Common: https://www.imdb.com/video/vi1364375065/?ref=vp_rv_ap_0
- NOTE: This is **not** the same as August Wilson's play *Two Trains Running*, which is part of the American Century Cycle. The title is that of a Blues song, but Wilson retains the final "g" in his play's title, while the Common documentary drops it. CONTENT ALERT: This documentary contains disturbing video and still imagery of racist speeches and attacks in the deep South during the 1950's and 1960's.

Bonus Material *continued*

- For a recording of W.C. Handy singing *Joe Turner Blues*, see: https://youtu.be/ZIXrP9s3WcU?si=FBFFm3LO_BL_he4B

NOTE: The W.C. Handy song is not the same as the song that is also entitled *Joe Turner Blues*, and that was recorded by Blues artists Mississippi John Hurt and Big Bill Broonzy:

- Mississippi John Hurt: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxsdNJ5Gsd0>
- Big Bill Broonzy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f31EzRopJ4>)
- For more on the quasi-historical, quasi-mythological figure Joe Turner, who used to kidnap Black men and force them into labor, see: <https://www.paulmerryblues.com/is-this-earliest-blues-ever-known/>

Miscellaneous

- Clip of Taraji B. Henson and others in a 2013 reading of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* directed by Phylicia Rashad: https://youtu.be/v_YZ5Y4ISHM?si=tqkx5vhZALp3E4
- Phylicia Rashad discussing *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*: <https://youtu.be/HijDfqFRdw0?si=dqBSXbYdKUIwUSXs>
- For a fascinating historical note about The Hill District in Pittsburgh, see the recent **HBO Max series “The Pitt,”** Season 1, episode 8, 41:00-42:30, in which a patient describes being part of the Freedom House Ambulance Service. Developed and implemented in 1967, and staffed by young Black men, this service was effectively the first EMT program in the United States, and it provided the foundation for the later paramedic training programs and services that are still active today.
 - For more on the episode and on the Freedom House Ambulance Service, see: <https://www.anesthesiology.pitt.edu/news/max-tvs-pitt-shines-spotlight-freedom-house-ambulance-service#:~:text=The%20show%2C%20which%20premiered%20in,authentic%20portrayal%20of%20emergency%20medicine.>

ABOUT

A Noise Within

A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.



aNoiseWithin
Classic Theatre, Modern Magic

Julia Rodriguez-Elliott & Geoff Elliott
PRODUCING ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

ADDRESS 3352 E Foothill Blvd
Pasadena, CA 91107

TEL 626.356.3100

FAX 626.356.3120

EMAIL info@anoisewithin.org

WEB anoisewithin.org