

Shamanism and African Identity: An Exploration into August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

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Abstract: Amiri Baraka has said that when you look in the mirror you should see your God. If you don't, you have somebody else's God. So, in fact, what you do worship is an image of God which is white, which is the image of the very same people who have oppressed you, who have put you on slave ships, who have beaten you, and who have forced you to work. The image was a white man. And the image that you were given to worship as a God is the image of a white man (quoted in *Conversations with August Wilson*, 77) Having faith, believing in a set of values and traditions, and applying the principles to a way of life describe the millions of religious people around the world. Cultural beliefs are typically related to religious beliefs. For example, the identity of a person or group is shaped by religious values, beliefs, and affiliation. These values are often passed on to future generations. This present paper delves deep into the ancient form of spirituality called shamanism employed by the African American playwright, August Wilson, in his play namely *Joe Turners Come and Gone*.

Keywords: Amiri Baraka, African identity, cultural beliefs

August Wilson is widely recognized as one of the foremost chroniclers of African American experience. Patricia M. Gantt in the article entitled "Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson's *Pittsburgh Cycle* comments, "If it can be said that a single voice dominated the American theater from the 1980s through 2005, that voice definitely belonged to playwright August Wilson" (1). Wilson, whom news analyst Gwen Ifill dubbed "the American Shakespeare" (2) was a prolific writer with more than ten major plays, numerous theatrical commentaries and other creative works to his credit. About his achievement Wilson remarks in the American theater:

I wanted to present the unique particulars of black American culture as the transformation of impulse and sensibility into codes of conduct and response, into cultural rituals that defined and celebrated ourselves as men and women of high purpose. I wanted to place this culture on stage in all its richness and fullness to demonstrate its ability to sustain us in all areas of life and endeavor and through profound moments of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves. (20)

By employing shamanism in his plays, August Wilson has brought to the limelight the unique practice of African American people as opposed to their mainstream counterparts. Ching in "Wrestling Against History"

remarks on the superstition and tradition of various cultures to point out Wilson's relying on African heritage and religious practices:

Every culture generates its own myths and superstitions, taboos and rituals of exorcism. To secure a glorious after life, early Egyptians embalmed their deceased rulers. Ancient Greeks went to Delphi to worship divine wisdom to learn about their fates... Being a black American, August Wilson's heritage goes back to African traditions which are based on similar pantheistic views of celestial order ruling both living and the dead. (70)

In August Wilson's *Pittsburgh Cycle*, shamanism and African traditional religious rites have evolved as significant force enabling the resurrection of the African in African American experiences. Wilson himself notes that "the metaphysical presence of the spirit world has become increasingly important in my work. It is the world that characters turn to when they are most in need" (*American Histories*, 1). Wilson's characters suffering from psychic exile turn to the metaphysical presence of spirit to find an outlet from their trauma. Harry J Elam in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* remarks on the correlation between crisis and spirituality in Wilson's plays:

The play's crisis create a context for spiritual acts that conjoin politics and culture, past and present, history and memory, individual and community. The embrace of the spiritual, the engagement in what one could call "faith-based" cultural practices—in that they foreground spiritual commitment—serve Wilson's Africans in America as critical survival strategies. (167)

Wilson's African influenced spirituality fundamentally concerns processes of healing as it connects the everyday trials and tribulations of black life to the forces of the divine. Lawrence Levine in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* notes on the significance of incorporating African traditional rites in African American writings. Lawrence Levine has observed the sacred sensibility of traditional African societies as being "a means of extending the world spatially upward so that communication with the other world becomes ritually possible, and extending it temporally backward so that the paradigmatic acts of god and mythical ancestors can be continually reenacted and indefinitely recoverable" (quoted in Harrison, *Black Theatre*, 319). The word "shaman" is a cognate to the word Saman, first used by a Tungus-speaking people, the Evenk, in Siberia. The role of the Shaman in his/her society is a vital one. They communicated with spirits and animals and saw visions of the future. Born from the reverence early humanity had for their surroundings and the eternal wonderment of the spirit world, a shaman held a distinction as being different from that of a magician or healer in early society. As a faith, shamanism fits into many types of belief systems due to the fact that it is independent of dogmatic, institutionalized structure that hinders most organized religions. Shamanism is one of the oldest divinatory practices in the world to promote healing and spiritual wellness. From archaeological and anthropological evidence, it can be seen that the practice has existed for some 20,000 to 30,000 years.

Evidence of shamanism has been found globally in isolated regions of the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa, regions of Europe and Australia. The shamans relied on alliances with spirits for their magic. Through altered states of consciousness, induced with or without the aid of a catalyst, the shaman would converse with the spirits. They were believed to have the power to foresee the future, heal the sick and bring success to the hunting or fishing expedition. Mircea Eliade in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* notes shamans as “specialist in the human soul” (8), the individual who is responsible for the spiritual and physical health of the tribe who, in a visionary trance, “journeys into spiritual realms to seek out and remove the sources of illness” (5). Eliade notes that the initiation of a shaman can come about either through “hereditary transmission” or “spontaneous vocation” (13). A shaman does not choose his work, but is chosen by the spirits to pursue the life of a healer. Elam in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* remarks that Wilson wants his African American characters who suffer from psychic exile to be healed by resorting to African ways of cleansing the soul:

Like Frantz Fanon's concept of “sociogeny” (11) outlined in *White Skin/ Black Masks*, Wilson's dramaturgy demonstrates that the cultural – current social conditions and past oppression can have an impact on the psychological trauma, the social dis-ease eating at the fabric of American lives. Cultural healing as well as cultural reclamation are critical objectives in Wilson's dramaturgical project. He wants his black figures like Loomis to achieve wellness, to be both black and whole. (5)

The present paper delineates the self actualization attained through shamanism in the play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Reggie Young in “Phantom Limbs Dancing Juba Rites in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*” remarks that Wilson in his plays “reveals the interrelationship between physical and metaphysical reality in black diasporic culture, a relationship that has been surveyed increasingly by African American expressive artists in various genres over the last several decades and one in which the reconciling of the slave past is an important factor in personal redemption” (130). In the above mentioned play, the past both personal and communal play a major role in resolving the psychic trauma experienced by the protagonist. According to Reggie Young “spiritual realism” is the term which can be applied to Wilson's treatment of African spirituality in his plays which renders an effective understanding of his plays concerned with African traditional religious practices. Reggie adds that spiritual realism is akin to magic realism, but the term spiritual realism is “unique because they are firmly rooted in the culture of juba, ring shouts, spirituals, and the blues, and share a cultural connection to Africa and not Latin America or Western Europe, except in incidental ways” (130). Michael Dash in *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* says that magical realism was originally conceived as “marvelous realism” by Alejo Carpentier in an attempt “to ground otherness in New World space” (Dash, 88). According to Reggie Young, “in New World African spiritual

realism, expressive artists realize the need to do more than to establish American identities- the goal is to seek wholeness and self and community redemption through the realization of an Africanized past”(130). Spiritual realism as espoused by Wilson attempts to “negotiate through artistic expression the demands faced by black people in the Americas who must cope with living in a secular, individualistic, material based society while trying to preserve and maintain the essence of a sacred, communal past, based on folk values and spiritual beliefs” (Young, 131). Wilson's characters become a part of spiritual realism when they disconnect themselves from their American experience and values imposed on them through that experience (Young, 131). Young elaborates on the significance of spiritual realism in causing redemption and self- actualization and there by subverts the Eurocentric notions of salvation followed by the main stream society:

This allows them to disengage themselves from the debilitating paradigm of American cultural reality and seeks a redemption that is only possible in the context of a different value system. Instead of African American and American culture being superimposed, what occurs is a process of differentiating and delineating uniquely African cultural values and beliefs from American ones. In African American literature spiritual realism often functions as an opportunity for characters to renew or redeem themselves through a process of rituals that allow them to reconnect their values and beliefs with sacred elements of the culture. (131)

In Wilson's dramaturgy, the recuperation, the recognition, the reaffirmation of song is critical to reintegrating African Americans with their African past, with their spiritual and cultural roots. Elam posits that the reaffirmation of the “song” is inevitable for the reintegration of African Americans with their African past:

Wilson depicts black people in liminal space, displaced and disconnected from their history, separated from their individual identity and in search of spiritual resurrection and socio-political reconnection. Wilson suffuses their search with musical imagery: his alienated and dislocated black characters must rediscover their song... It evokes pleasure and pain, struggle and survival, the complexities and contradictions inherent in African American experience. (*The Past*, 29-30)

Elam finds a connection between Wilson's evocation of spirit and the Yoruban concept of *ashe* that Robert Farris Thompson in his important work *Flash of the Spirit* defines as “spiritual command” (5). Elam comments on the metaphysical power within Wilson's characters:

Assertion of *ashe* in Wilson involves embodied action in which the spirit of God is not outside but within the body of characters. Thus, Wilson's spirituality overcomes the conventional Christian divide between the spirit and the flesh, between God and individual, between body and soul, through enactments that bring greater psychological awareness, spiritual empowerment, and revolutionary determination for both the individual actor and gathered community. (169)

Wilson unearths African retentions that dwell beneath black American experiences. He refigures African American spirituality, fusing the African with the American in a distinct form that celebrates a sense of spiritual - definition and inner self – determination, a secular, sacred and visual expression of “song”. Wole Soyinka in “The Fourth Stage” talks about the initiation of a shaman, “only one who has himself undergone the experience of disintegration, whose spirit has been tested and whose psychic resources laid under stress by the forces inimical to individual assertion, only he can understand and be the force of fusion between the two contradictions” (33). In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* the characters wrestle over their ideas of religion and God. There are confluence and commingling of African rites and Christianity in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Elam in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* remarks that “Loomis's performance of self- mutilation resonates with both African and Euro-Christian rites of blood sacrifice, and in its unique syncretism and in its social and symbolic meanings represents an act that is decidedly African American” (23). Such ritual scenes in Wilson's dramaturgy “work to refigure the forgetting, the amnesia, the losses of history and the history of loss; they are signal moments in which Wilson ritualizes time, memory and history” (*The Past*, 23). In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson has dexterously employed shamanism to render and the African space to his play. The play revolves around the fulcrum of African Traditional Religions and Christianity. African Traditional Religions are characterized by belief in spirits and practice of magic and ritual. Aylward Shorter compares African Traditional Religions to Christianity and states: “Christianity is a 'Religion of Book,' a highly literate religion with a long history of theological expositions, written and oral. . . . African Traditional Religions, on the other hand, is not only historically preliterate; it is by choice not even always orally articulate” (“African Christian Theology”, 7). Amanda M. Rudolph, explores the development of African Christianity in America and she records:

When the slaves were brought to America from Africa, some of their religious artifacts were lost. As these people began living in America, the religion from Africa was somewhat regained as slaves began worshipping. The white slave owners refused to share Christianity with the slaves at first, as they were afraid it might bring equality. Soon they were convinced that Christianity would make the slaves more docile. (104)

Paris, in *The Religious World of African Americans* notes that, “the slaves eventually embraced part of Christianity because of the telling of the exodus story. Paris states that the exodus story is critical to the change in the slaves beliefs because “it connotes a living and caring God who not only sees, hears and knows about human suffering but willingly chooses to become actively engaged in a liberating activity” (73). African Traditional Religions tend to view all people as messengers of religion whereas Christianity maintains a hierarchy of divine leaders. Christianity is a word based religion. According to Amanda Rudolph, “the power of Christianity would dissipate without the Bible” (105). August Wilson's

play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, exhibits that, as the African Americans started living in America, their religious beliefs got entangled with Christianity. The result is an intermingling of the characteristics of African Traditional Religions and Christianity. August Wilson in his prologue to *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* reiterates the mosaic religious beliefs of the African Americans. Wilson records:

From the deep and near south the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their hearts kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow crooked cobbles. . . shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth. (9)

As the play opens, Wilson grabs the attention of the audience to the magical and mysterious rites of Bynum, a resident of the boarding house owned by Seth and Bertha. The play is set against the backdrop of August 1911, a period when the environment and society were not far removed from slavery. The setting of the play [boarding house] and the story line are the fundamental metaphor for homeless, uprooted people seeking families to belong to. Seth and Bertha function as parents to an extended kin of characters in addition to Herald and his daughter. The play is full of examples of African Traditional Religions. The play includes a story of a Shiny Man, rituals, ghost, a juba dance and self-inflicted cutting, all of which relates to the tenets of African Traditional Religions. Once Bynum enters the scene, the audience hears the story of his edification as a shaman. Antony Bibus III in "Family Metaphors in Three Plays by August Wilson: A Source of Deeper Cultural Sensitivity" comments on the name "Bynum", the name of the "conjure man" or "root worker" in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. He remarks that Bynum's name describes his purpose in life, he "binds 'em ,that is , he helps people connect with their song , their meaning in life , their values their goals ,and their loved ones"(17). When Rutherford Selig, a traveling peddler, popular among the people as a "People Finder" arrives at the boarding house, Bynum asks him whether he could find his "Shinyman". Selig complains that he cannot find a person without a name. Bynum tells of his own election [as a shaman] which occurs on the road near Johnstown where he encounters a hungry man to whom he offers food and who, subsequently, promises to teach him the "meaning of life." The traveler rubs blood on Bynum's hands and encourages him to cleanse himself by smearing it on his face. Following this ritual, Bynum's companion begins to glow, and all the objects in the vicinity grow twice their normal size, "sparrows big as eagles" (26). Next Bynum encounters the distorted image of his dead father, and the ghost of his father interpreted this mystic experience to him:

I asked him about the shinyman and he told me he was the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way. Said there was lots of shinyman 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 . . . I had my song. I had the Binding Song. I choose that song because that is what I seen most when I was travelling . . . people walking away and leaving one another. So I take the power of my song and bind them together. (10)

James. R. Keller in "The Shaman's Apprentice: Ecstasy and Economy in Wilson's *Joe Turner*- August Wilson and the African American Odyssey" notes that Bynum's encounter with the shinyman "constitutes a clever mixture of pagan and Christian imagery" (10). He observes:

Bynum's shamanic powers are a negotiation between the religious heritage of Western culture and the practices of his African and Caribbean ancestors. Bynum's experience is reminiscent of St. Paul's ecstasy on the road to Damascus, where he would encounter the crucified Christ and get converted to a new religion. The location itself near Johnstown may be a very subtle allusion to the revelation of St. John, another scriptural ecstasy as well as a reference to John the Baptist, who is cited specifically in the characterization of the "shiny man" as the "One who Goes Before and Shows the Way (26)." The Shinyman's blood that cleanses Bynum is of course, an allusion to the redemptive qualities of Christ's blood, and the shinyman's glow may be an allusion to the transfiguration of Christ; still another ecstatic moment in the gospels. (10)

James R. Keller states that "the imagery of Bynum's ecstasy has a dual signification, one that yokes together historically antithetical religious traditions. Many of the attributes associated with Christianity are decidedly shamanic" (10). David Friedal, Linda et al in *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* remark, " blood is integral to many ancient rituals since it was believed to open the portals between worlds and nourish the spirits" (201) and it is only after Bynum rubs himself in his companion's blood that his environment changes. "The subsequent encounter with his father's spirit suggests the hereditary transmission of the shaman's vocation" (Keller, 10). It is his father's ghost who urges Bynum to find his song. Bynum reveals that his dead father was a "conjure man" whose song had the capacity to heal, a vocation consistent with the shaman's principal objective – to alleviate spiritual and physical suffering through interaction with the spiritual world as stated by Elaide. In his effort to discover his own song, Bynum deliberately selects the one that differs from his father's vocation. Nevertheless, he selects a song that possesses a philanthropic objective; the power to bind those who are separated. In Bynum's ecstasy, his father reminds him that if he ever sees another shiny man, he will know that his work has been successful. Thus the appearance of a "shinyman" towards the closure of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* implies the consummation of Bynum's work and the passing on of the powers to the next generation, the obvious recipient being Loomis who has been chosen to carry on the profession. Walter Ong in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the*

World says “since shamanism is an oral tradition, it is necessary for the practitioner to initiate and train the next generation – those subsequent medicine men becoming the new repositories of cultural wisdom”(10). Elam remarks on the power of Bynum as a shaman: “The power of `ashe not only bonds Bynum with the African past and regenerates him, it enables him to know and influence events in the play before they transpire” (*The Past*, 190). He knows about Loomis's coming and he must prepare for it, “significantly Bynum dances . . . His body becomes a vessel of spiritual power” (*The Past*, 190). Kim Pereria in *August Wilson and African American Odyssey* notes that Christ gave St. Peter the binding power just as Bynum receives the binding power from his father (72). Elam in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* notes that even the reference to St. Peter is equally African, “. . . within Haitian Vodun, a NewWorld descendant of Yoruban observances, Christianity is adapted and St. Peter becomes associated with Eshu, the spirit of the crossroads, the messenger of gods in worship practices” (182). Farris Thompson in *Flash of the Spirit* also comments on the similarities between Christianity and African rites: “Haitians actually transformed the meaning of the Catholic icons by observing their similarities to African spirits” (69). Wilson's selection of the name for the prospective shaman too is significant. Loomis's past life is in fact destined to be a herald to his future election and edification as a shaman. Paul Carter Harrison in “August Wilson's Blues Poetics” comments on the importance of “names” in the lives of African Americans:

Seth is not certain of what to call Loomis, whose symbolic freedom is located in the cosmic significations of his name, Herald. The act of naming, and in some cases, unnamings, is a linguistic ritual of self-possession and communal aggrandizement. 'Don't call me out my name' is a common injunction by most black children in response to the magic involved in whatever significant ceremony created the name. (312)

Ralph Ellison in “Hidden Names and Complex Fate” reports, “We must learn to wear our names within all the noise and confusion in which we find ourselves. They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/ or imagine being the meaning of our familial past” (151). Loomis's initiation into his “calling” commences when he listens to Bynum's song, “THEY TELL ME JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE OHHH LORDY”, and hearing this Loomis responds angrily and says “I don't like you singing that song, mister!” (104). Loomis wants to forget his past, but Bynum forces him to remember his enslavement as way of confronting that history; as a means of going back in order to move forward; as a step toward letting go in order to recover his song. Here memory functions as an active agent, interpreting the past and illuminating present action. Walter Benjamin writes in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'... It means to seize hold of

memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (255). The final scene of the first act of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is significant as it reveals the calling of Loomis. All the boarding house members except Loomis join the Juba dance. Wilson in his stage direction mentions clearly that “*The Juba should be as African as possible, with the performers working themselves up into a near frenzy. The words can be improvised, but should include some mention of the Holy Ghost*” (80). Lynne Fauley Emery points out in *Black Dance* that “Under the guise of Protestantism, the Ring Shout retained the characteristics of African sacred dance. The purpose of the Shout was possession, as it was in Voodoo, Shango, and Nanigo. Possession in the Shout, however, was by the spirit of the Lord, not Damballa or Shango” (120). Possession in African American ring shout as, Emery relates is a relationship with the divine that was experiential and personal. Elam points out:

The embodied act of dancing connected the celebrant with the spiritual forces beyond. Similarly in Yoruba ritual observances, the act of drumming and dancing materializes the supernatural potential within the phenomenal world and institutes conditions necessary for spiritual possession. The Yoruban possession dance is one in which the priestess of the god, for possession generally is the domain of women transforms into the medium of the god. (203)

Margaret Thompson Drewal in “Yoruba Ritual: Performance, Play and Agency” writes about the events that led from spirited dance to spiritual possession of an agent of Ogun in the Egbado town of Igbogila, Nigeria in 1978: “There was a transformation in her attitude: from outgoing and playful to concentrated, serious and inwardly focused. As if bound to the spot, she stopped moving her feet; her upper torso veered to the side; her head dropped; and her left knee quivered, causing the entire body to tremble. A priest in this state is called ‘the horse of the god’” (183). The response of Loomis to their invocation of the Holy Ghost while they dance is blasphemous:

LOOMIS. (*Slams his fist with his hat on the table in a rage.*) Stop it! Stop! (*The others stop the dance and respond as if he is preaching to them.*) You all sitting up here singing about the Holy Ghost. What's so Holy about the Holy Ghost? You singing and singing. You think the Holy Ghost coming? You singing for the Holy Ghost to come? What he gonna do, huh? (*They echo him.*) He gonna come with tongues of fire to burn up your wooly heads? (*They stop the response, turn to look at him.*) You gonna tie onto the Holy Ghost and get burned up? What you got then? Why God got to be so big? Why he got to be bigger than me? How much big is there? How much big do you want? (*Starts to unbutton his pants*). (80)

Schele and Freidal in *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* records that “many shamanic (most notably Native American) ritual practices involve ancestor worship; the medicine man encountering the spirits of dead loved ones who inaugurate and direct his spiritual vocation” (202). Loomis too encounters his ancestors and he tells others “Herald Loomis done seen some things he ain't got words to tell you” (81). When Bynum asks Loomis what he had seen he says, “I

done seen bones rise up out the water. Rise up and walk across the water. Bones walking on top of the water” (81). He encounters his ancestors who lost their life in the Middle Passage which gives him an insight into his vocation. Loomis narrates his encounter with his ancestors: “(*Kneels, cowering, terror- struck by his vision.*) I come to this place... to this water that was bigger than the whole world. And I looked out... (*Rises, still kneeling, looks out and reaches for vision downstage. BYNUM looks out.*) and I had seen these bones rise up out the water. Rise up and begin to walk on top of it” (81). Loomis's transformation into a shaman is a complex process since he has to literally wrestle with his wife Martha Pentacost who has turned out to be an incarnation of Christianity. Martha is part of the church and even her name, “Martha Pentacost”, reflects the dominant religion. These elements create the opposing forces to shamanism. When she finds Loomis in the boarding house, she is a symbol of Christianity. When Loomis struggles with his identity and ancestry, Martha begins to recite the 23rd Psalm. As he begins to understand his song, he denies everyone who tries to bind him. Martha on seeing the knife in Loomis's hand bewails that her husband has been enslaved by a devil. She tries to instill confidence in him saying “you got to look to Jesus. Even if you had done fell away from church you can be saved again” (132). He retorts, “I done been baptized with the blood of the lamb and the fire of the Holy Ghost. But What I git, huh? I got salvation?” (133). The culmination of his transformation comes when Martha says, “Jesus bled for you”, for which he replies, “I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself” (133). Loomis slashes himself across the chest and “*looks down at the blood on his chest and wipes his hands across his blood and washes the blood over his face in wonder*” (134). In the final scene, blood is the ultimate cleanser. After the self-mutilation, Loomis accepts his responsibility as a shaman. Loomis's blood ritual is a clear refusal of Christ as the sacrificial subject. While his wife prays for his soul, Loomis declaims against Christianity's false pledge to alleviate the suffering of African Americans. He identifies Christ as an instrument of domination, encouraging African Americans to abide their maltreatment patiently and offering little more than abstract promises of happiness after death. Dismissing the idea that Christ can atone for his sins, Loomis explains that he has done enough bleeding to warrant salvation on his own terms, and it is at this moment that the play declares Loomis's “self-sufficiency”, his liberation from western cultural and theological traditions. Paul Carter relates Loomis's ritual gesture of self – inflicted blood letting as “Wilson's acknowledgement of the ancient Egyptian mythos attributed to the dark god Osiris- the hidden one who is key to light- who offers humanity the opportunity to become one with God, through the spiritual cleansing associated with birth and rebirth” (313). The Osirian mythos is based on death and rebirth and Paul Carter ingeniously connects it to the vision of Herald Loomis:

The Osirian Mythos, which invites the death of the body in order to allow for the resurrection of the spirit/body, is the foundation of Judeo- Christian messianic sacrifice, salvation, transfiguration, and self redemption. Loomis seeks such redemption, which is revealed to

him in the specter of the slave ancestors. 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 flesh on their bones . . . The ritual sacrifice of Loomis's body becomes the seeding of the new soul, the body gilded with the precious life force- blood until it shines like the armor of pure song/spirit. (313-314)

Elam compares Loomis's blood ritual to Wole Soyinka's adaptation of *The Bacchae of Euripides* and remarks that in both cases "individual actions not only serve his liberation but, as ritual, benefit the greater community around him, offering regeneration" (212). He comments on the sacrificial nature of blood letting of Soyinka's Pentheus and Wilson's Loomis:

In Soyinka's *Bacchae*, the head of Pentheus, torn from its body by his possessed mother Agave and other bacchants, is placed on a stake above the city's gate. The blood dripping from the severed head transmutes into wine, and the community as a whole partakes, drinking in this transformed spirit that offers a new life of forgiveness and change. Loomis transformed by his blood now 'shines like new money'. His act manifests for himself and others a radical new beginning. (212)

The presence of water in Bynum's and Loomis's vision connects them to Aunt Ester, Elam notes in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*:

The presence of water in Bynum's vision symbolically binds him to Aunt Ester, the Pittsburgh river goddess, as well as to Loomis and to the importance of water as a regenerative force within African and African American rituals of conversion. The experience of baptism was and continues to be performed in the black church at the water's edge and to involve the total submersion in water. As a result of this ritual ceremony, the baptismal subject is "born again" within the Christian faith. Deliberately infusing Christianity with an African sensibility, baptism confirms the presence of the spirit within the body of the African American initiate. (189)

Loomis's stepping out of the boarding house as a shaman is an act of looking back to Africa. Elam notes, "By finding the god within, Loomis journeys to Africa. He leaves with new knowledge that is gained by his revolutionary action, which sends him back to the spot of initiating rupture... The ending becomes a beginning. He is remembered and renewed" (212). August Wilson by dexterously incorporating shamanism in his play has successfully achieved his mission of authenticating the African space in American theatre. Young remarks on the significance of spiritual realism; "the intersection of the mystical and realistic in African American culture is endemic and plays an important role in black vernacular expression" (142). Through *Joe Turners Come and Gone*, Wilson substantiates that African Americans find their salvation in their own traditional ways and that they do not need the help of the white man's God in their way towards self-actualization.

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