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**Revolutionary Violence Vs. Passive Resistance:  
Liberation Strategies in Amiri Baraka's *The Slave*  
and August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone***

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**Abstract**

This paper traces the influence of violence and passive resistance, as two competing modes of postcolonial theory and practice, on two African American plays: Amiri Baraka's *The Slave* (1964) and August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988). Freedom of the oppressed African Americans sits at the heart of both plays, but the liberation strategies adopted by the protagonists are totally different. While *The Slave* suggests that violence is an indispensable tool in the fight for freedom, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* focuses on peaceful struggle and spiritual liberation. Analyzing the dilemmas of Walker Vessels in *The Slave* and Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, subjecting the means and ends of their pursuits to comparative critical analysis, the paper explores the validity of the different paths they take to attain freedom. Through the critical lens of postcolonial theory, the texts are situated within the larger cultural and historical context of African American struggle for freedom, with special reference to Malcolm X's black power movement influenced by Frantz Fanon's revolutionary violence theory and Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement inspired by Gandhi's theory of passive resistance.

**Key Words**

Amiri Baraka, August Wilson, Black Power, Civil Rights Movement, passive resistance, postcolonial theory, revolutionary violence

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Postcolonial theoretical engagement with resistance to colonial power has generated an intellectual controversy concerning the means of resistance. A wider debate has been expanded beyond the colonial context to parallel contexts that involve oppression or inequitable power relations, with questions of what is to be done to oppose oppression, and how and on what grounds resistance is to be exercised. The literature is replete with theoretical claims that violence offers the only realistic path for the liberation of oppressed people in contexts of colonialism, racism, repressive authoritarian regimes, and violent hegemonic cultures. Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist and postcolonial theorist, described by George Fredrickson as “the prophet of decolonization through violence” (193), gave impetus to these claims with his theory of revolutionary violence which he sees as an “inevitable” liberating tool that paves the way for social transformation (17). Fanon’s theory has been endorsed by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Memmi, Herbert Marcuse, Che Guevara, Malcolm X and Angela Davis, among many others. His seminal book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) – inspired by the anti-colonial war in Algeria – has been critically universalized, being viewed not only as “a call to violent action against the coloniser” but also as “a

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radical militant anthem for all oppressed peoples” (Shringarpure).

Jean Amery exalts the “revolutionary violence” prescribed by Fanon to liberate the oppressed and reinvigorate their humanity as opposed to the “repressive violence” of the oppressor: “Repressive violence blocks the way to the self-realization of the human being; revolutionary violence breaks through that barrier, refers and leads to the more than temporal, the historical humane future” (16). Counter claims deny the possibility of a more humane future with the use of violence as a means of resistance. Opponents of revolutionary violence, like Hannah Arendt, Gene Sharp, David Dellinger, and Richard Gregg, contend that it reproduces new forms of hegemonic power associated with “direct, structural and cultural violence,” and thus “while regime change is certainly possible through violent resistance, genuine revolution towards human emancipation necessitates both nonviolent aims and nonviolent means of transformation” (Jackson 1). Nonviolence Proponents often rely on Gandhi’s theory and practice of passive resistance as both theoretical and empirical evidence to prove the power of nonviolence to achieve social and political transformation. Gandhi is invoked by pacifists as “the most significant modern figure in the development of nonviolent resistance” (Schock 278), a pioneer leader who succeeded in liberating India through nonviolent tactics “without at all adhering to the Marxist model of a violent and bloody revolution such as championed notably by Frantz Fanon and uniformly valorized in the postcolonial and subaltern studies discourses” (Trivedi 521).

The present study traces the influence of violence and passive resistance, as two competing modes of postcolonial

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theory and practice, on two African American plays that seem to recast Fanon's and Gandhi's notions in dramatic form: Amiri Baraka's *The Slave* (1964) and August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988). Freedom of the oppressed African Americans sits at the heart of both plays, but the liberation strategies adopted by the protagonists are totally different. While *The Slave* suggests that violence is an indispensable tool in the fight for freedom, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* focuses on peaceful struggle and spiritual liberation. Analyzing the dilemmas of Walker Vessels in *The Slave* and Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, subjecting the means and ends of their pursuits to comparative critical analysis, I explore the validity of the different paths they have taken to attain freedom. Through the critical lens of postcolonial theory, the texts are situated within the larger cultural and historical context of African Americans' struggle for freedom.

The struggle for freedom is the hallmark that epitomizes the collective experience of African Americans. Their whole history in America can be seen as a long journey in search of freedom and human dignity. Uprooted from their African homeland, they were forced to live as slaves in an alien society determined to dehumanize them. After almost three hundred years of slavery, a cradle-to-death segregation was designed, in the wake of the emancipation, not only to separate the races but also to “[subordinate] blacks to whites in all areas of social and economic life” (Massey and Denton 26). With their civil rights realized after another hundred years of struggle against Jim Crow, they began kicking against the myriad subtler forms of bigotry assumed by what Henry Louis Gates calls “the fluid mask of racism” (171), which has not entirely

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altered even after the success of an African American in holding the presidential office.

The black resistance against white oppression in all its forms reached its apex in the 1960s. Different means of resistance were then promoted by the Black Power movement and the Civil Rights movement. The Black Power called for violent protest and blatant resistance, relying on Fanon's theoretical arguments to legitimize revolutionary violence. It broadened the concept of colonization at the core of Fanon's theory to include the subordination of African Americans, as a racial minority, by their own state (Ture and Hamilton 20-21). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that violence dominates the whole colonial project, with all its political and cultural repercussions, including the creation of the discourse of the "native" and his subsequent relegation to inferiority, or juxtaposition as necessarily opposite, to a superior colonizer. Through violence, the colonial hierarchy that defines the nature of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is established; and, through violence, the perpetuation of the colonized subjugation under the colonial status quo is guaranteed. Fanon's theory centres on the legitimacy of the use of violence to subvert this colonial status quo and its established effects. Violence, in Fanon's view, should be an integral part of the process of decolonization. "In its bare reality," he maintains, "decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can be the first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists" (3). Fanon contends, moreover, that violence unites the colonized people behind a common cause, creating a sense of community that empowers their revolution: "This violent praxis is totalizing since each individual represents a violent link in the great chain, in the

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almighty body of violence rearing up in reaction to the primary violence of the colonizer ... The armed struggle mobilizes the people, i.e., it pitches them in a single direction, from which there is no turning back" (50).

The Black Power leader, Malcolm X, brought Fanon's theory inspired by the Algerians' experience with French colonization to the African diaspora in America. In a speech titled "The Black Revolution" (1964), he described America as an internal "colonial power" that "has colonized 22 million African Americans by depriving [them] of first-class citizenship" (50). Following Malcolm X, Black Power activists, particularly Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton, referred to African Americans as "colonial subjects" who "have their political decisions made for them by the colonial masters" (21). In *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (1967), they employed "internal colonialism," "domestic colony" and "liberation" as central terms for mass action in the African American context. "By any means necessary" was the motto of the Black Power, echoing Malcolm X's words: "We want freedom by any means necessary. We want justice by any means necessary. We want equality by any means necessary" (*By Any Means Necessary* 9). Malcolm X used revolutionary rhetoric to incite blacks to rise up and throw off the shackles of their bondage to the colonial power of white America. To him, only through revolution could blacks restore their rights, and violence was part of that revolution. In "Message to the Grass Roots," he correlates revolution and violence: "Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way" (9). Malcolm X explicitly denounced the nonviolence and passive resistance discourses. "[You don't have a peaceful](#)

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revolution,” he asserts, “You don’t have a turn-the-other-cheek revolution. There’s no such thing as a nonviolent revolution” (“Message to the Grass Roots” 9).

The Civil Rights movement espoused an opposite stance based on Martin Luther King’s endorsement of Gandhi’s theory of passive resistance. Like the black power leaders, King regarded the institutional racism of white America as a form of “internal colonization.” He referred to the black ghetto as “a domestic colony which leaves its inhabitants dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated and humiliated at every turn” (qtd. in Arneil 8). He, however, never considered violence a legitimate means of resistance even against barefaced violent racism. For him, violence is immoral, inexcusable and counterproductive. He pays homage to Gandhi as “the guiding light of [his] technique of nonviolent social change” (“My Trip to the Land of Gandhi” 84). At the core of Gandhi’s theory lies an unwavering belief in the necessity of spiritual liberation, a transformation of the self prior to the transformation of society. The terms “spirit,” “soul,” “inner,” “inwardness,” and “passive resistance” appear frequently in Gandhi’s lexicon. He coined the term “satyagraha”, literally meaning “the power of truth” or “soul force,” as a form of nonviolent resistance: “Satyagraha is a weapon of the strong; it admits of no violence under any circumstance whatsoever; and it ever insists upon truth” (16: 509). As Leela Gandhi indicates, “Gandhi settled upon satyagraha, ‘truth’ or ‘soul’ force, as the only appropriate denotation of his uniquely inwardly directed political style (162). Utilizing the soul force he promoted among his people, he set up a constructive programme to “vanquish the government’s armed might by non-violent non-cooperation” (19: 354). Civil disobedience, non-cooperation with governmental institutions, boycotting

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British goods, and promoting economic self-sufficiency symbolized by the “Spinning Wheel” were Gandhi’s non-violent means to liberate India.

Following Gandhi, King converted the concept of soul force into a dynamic social and political technique for mass action rooted in inner strength, self-respect, hard work, and high moral standards. “We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline,” he states in “I Have a Dream,” “We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force” (3). In “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” he offers a strategy for liberation based upon diverse nonviolent tactics such as peaceful protest, well-organized marches, economic boycotts, and group organization, which he regards as the “most powerful nonviolent weapon,” for to produce change and reach justice people must be organized to work together in peaceful political, economic, and social units of power. To the contrary, instead of inciting positive change and solving the blacks’ problems, violence would merely create new and more complicated ones. In King’s view “[a] group of ten thousand marching in anger against a police station and cussing out the chief of police will do very little to bring respect, dignity and unbiased law enforcement;” it “would only produce fear and bring about an addition of forces to the station and more oppressive methods by the police” (“Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom”). In “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” King warns that if the “victims of oppression succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle for justice, unborn generations will



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live in a desolate night of bitterness, and their chief legacy will be an endless reign of chaos” (120).

The discourses and practices of violence and passive resistance, as two different strategies of resistance promoted respectively by the Black Power and the Civil Rights movement, have been deeply reflected in the black literature of the 1960s and afterwards. Like most of the 1960s black writers and artists, Amiri Baraka was influenced by the Black Power movement and its call for a violent revolt. He is described as “the fieriest of black writers” (Caute 160), and “the Frantz Fanon of poetry” (W. Harris). Sustaining black activism, he launched the Black Art Movement in 1965, encouraging a separate body of black art, political in content and distinct from the American artistic mainstream. According to Kalamu Ya Salaam, “America had never experienced such a militant artistic movement” (71). Through the Black Art Movement, the black revolt became “as palpable in letters as it [was] in the streets” (Fuller 263). In “Black Art,” his poetic manifesto of the Black Art Movement, Baraka writes:

... we want “poems that kill.”  
Assassin poems, poems that shoot Guns.  
.....  
Poems scream poison gas on beasts in green  
berets  
Clean out the world for virtue and love,  
Let there be no love poems written  
until love can exist freely and  
cleanly. (*Selected Poetry* 106-107)

The militant rhetoric in this poem, which encourages bloody violence against the white power structure and all those who

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foster oppression and condone injustice, recurs in Baraka's drama which represents the physical and spiritual load an ordinary black person has to endure while living in a White America infected by the plague of racial prejudice, as well as the blacks' determination to get justice and freedom by any means necessary. The image of the angry black who resorts to violence against white America is a major recurring motif in Baraka's plays. In *The Slave*, revolutionary violence acts as a major strategy for struggle.

*The Slave* begins with a prologue in which the protagonist, Walker Vessels, appears as an old field slave introducing the play. Such slave appearance in a play set in the 1960s suggests that, after one hundred years of the emancipation, white Americans were still looking at blacks as a race of slaves. C. Eric Lincoln asserts this fact in *My Face is Black*:

The tragedy is that a hundred years after my country ... purged its political and social conscience of the fact of human slavery as a legal institution ... it has not purged its moral consciousness. The sentiments of slavery are now perpetuated in other institutions by other names. For all our social progress, we have maintained in our attitudes and in our behavior persistent elements of the slave-holding mentality. The slaves are 'free,' but our minds are unfree. (1-2)

The image of the old field slave can also be interpreted as a symbol of the struggle for freedom. In "Message to the Grass Roots," Malcolm X makes a distinction between two kinds

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of slaves: the house slave, a symbol of subjection and passive acceptance of bondage; and the field slave, a symbol of rebellion and fighting for freedom (10-11). Invoking the field slave at the beginning of Baraka's play signifies that the struggle is still continuous. In the form of a field slave, Walker emblemizes both past and present militancy (Brown 150).

As the play proceeds, Walker is transformed into a revolutionary leader for a black liberation movement. After years of separation, he returns to face his former white wife, Grace, and reclaim his daughters in order for them not to be "freakish mulattoes in a world where your father is some evil black thing you can't remember" (68; Act I). Though they were a loving couple, Walker's inability to tolerate Grace's lack of sympathy with his violent revolt was the reason for their separation years ago. Calling for indiscriminate violence against all whites and asking his white wife to support him, it is as if he were asking for the impossible:

WALKER. I was preaching hate the white man ... kill the white man for our rights ... But those things I said ... pushed you away from me ... I thought I knew you, if any white person in the world could, I knew you would understand. And then you didn't.

GRACE. You were preaching the murder of all white people, Walker, I was, am, white.

WALKER. You were my wife ... I loved you. You mean because I loved you and was married to you ... I wasn't supposed to say the things I felt. I was crying out against three hundred years of oppression; not against individuals. (71-72; Act I).

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The whole play is a violent confrontation between Walker on the one hand and Grace and her second white husband, Easley – a former friend of Walker – on the other hand. It is clear from the very beginning that violence has become part and parcel of Walker's life. He arrives at Grace and Easley's house carrying a gun. Once an integrationist liberal journalist with many white friends, Walker turned, on joining the black revolution, into a violent separatist or a "racist murderer," to use Easley's words. He caused the death of many innocent whites, just "because the cause demands it" (83; Act II). He brags that he is the leader of the revolutionary forces responsible for the continuous explosions "beating this town flat" (58; Act I). Long exposure to American racism has killed in Walker any sense of patriotism. When Easley accuses him and his "noble black brothers" of "killing what's left of this city ... what's left of this country," he replies: "If that's what's happening. I mean if this shitty town is being flattened ... let it. It needs it" (49; Act 1).

Failure to communicate is what marks the relationship between the main characters in *The Slave*. It is the failure of communication between radicalist and reformist viewpoints. Grace and Easley clearly sympathize with the black suffering, but Walker has lost faith in the ability or even sincerity of liberal whites to support the black struggle. He embodies a recurrent theme in Baraka's plays, that "burning all bridges to white liberals is the first step toward liberation" (Hay 95). Walker accuses Easley of inaction: "You never did anything concrete to avoid what's going on now. Your sick liberal lip service to whatever was the least filth" (74; Act I). He mocks his nonviolent philosophy, citing Martin Luther King's in a ridiculous way: "My country, 'tis of thee. Sweet

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land of liberty ... Well, let's say liberty and ignorant vomiting faggot professors" (52; Act I).

King's theory of peaceful resistance has no place in *The Slave* whose protagonist has a deep conviction that taking action via violent revolt is the only valid path to freedom. Walker declares that he has joined the black revolution because "[he] couldn't be merely a journalist ... a social critic. No social protest ... right is in the act!" (75; Act I). He can be seen as a reflection of Amiri Baraka himself who – after a visit to Cuba in the wake of the Cuban revolution – abandoned the belief in peaceful protest and became convinced that "[it] was not enough just to write, to feel, to think, one must act, one should act" (Baraka, *Autobiography* 166).

Walker's logic which legitimizes revolutionary violence is unintelligible to Grace and Easley. What he perceives as legitimate protest is considered terrorism in their eyes. While he regards the death of his closest white friend in an explosion perpetrated by one of his followers as an accident, Easley retorts: "one of your terrorists did it" (76; Act I). Whereas he believes that he is targeting a political system, not individuals, Easley reminds him: "it's individuals who are dying" (72; Act I). For Grace, the path he has taken is a twisted one. As he turns deaf ears to her argument against violence, she says: "[t]his stupid ugly killing you've started will never do anything, for anybody. And you and all your people will be wiped out, you know that. And you'll have accomplished nothing" (68; Act I). For Grace and Easley, those blacks who follow Walker's violent path are not in their right mind, but twisted and brainwashed by Walker. He conversely considers the violence they have resorted to a natural reaction to the "ugliness" of the white

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racism they have been subjected to for so long till it twisted their psyches: “The country twisted ‘em ... The country had twisted them for so long” (77; Act I).

Another barrier to communication between the play’s main characters is that Walker has no agenda for positive change; he dreams, not of a better just society where blacks and whites can live freely and equally, but just of a transfer of power, “a change of the complexion of tyranny” (73; Act I). When asked about what he hopes to change and whether there will be more love or beauty in the world if blacks have the chance to rule it, he claims no intention for a better world:

What does it matter if there’s more love or beauty? Is that what the Western ofay thought while he was ruling ... That was not ever the point. Not even on the Crusades. The point is that you had your chance, darling, now these other folks have theirs ... The complete ugly horseshit cruelty of it is that there doesn’t have to be a change. (73-74; Act I)

Violence in *The Slave* reflects itself in different forms like speech, act, and rituals. It starts verbally as Walker tends to use ritual insults as a verbal outlet for his anger. Such use of ritual insults – known as the Dozens – is a characteristic of African American culture, developed by African Americans, in reaction to white assault upon their dignity, as a survival technique or a “release mechanism” to mildly express aggressive feelings (Abrahams 59). Lawrence W. Levine describes these ritual insults as an acquired “mechanism for teaching and sharpening the ability to

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control emotions and anger; an ability that was often necessary for survival” (358). Gradually the rhythm of Walker’s insults increases till he finally decides not to control his anger anymore, abandoning verbal protest and resorting to physical violence to express his hatred. According to Olga Barrios, “[i]n the new language of action, the expression of hatred becomes a significant component ... a way to relieve the rage which was boiling” (52-53).

Walker’s determination to liberate his hatred and take action, no matter how violent it may be, results in his final shooting of Easley. His self-assertive violence is hence employed randomly. According to the father of the Black Power school of militant resistance, Malcolm X, violence should be resorted to only in self-defense. His moral prescription to blacks in America is to “[be] peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery” (“Message to the Grassroots” 12). While such prescription promotes disproportionate violence, it is still in the realm of rational self-defense against the aggressor. Walker’s violence against Easley is conversely random and thoughtless. Easley is not a racist; as a liberal with “a long history of concern for minorities,” he joins the blacks in their hatred of oppression (52; Act I). For Walker, however, Easley is an enemy; he sees him, not as an individual, but as a symbol of all the white forces he rebels against. As Robert E. Washington maintains, “Walker, reflecting the outlook of black militants in the 1960s, lump all whites into a single category” (298). He thus shows no sympathy with the dying Easley who is struggling to speak:

You shut up. I don’t want to hear anything else  
from you ... No profound statements ... No

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elegance. You just die quietly and stupidly.  
Like niggers do. Like they are now. Like I will.  
The only thing I'll let you say is, 'I only regret  
that I have but one life to lose for my country.'  
You can say that ... but no more. No more.  
There is no reason he should go out with any  
kind of dignity. I couldn't allow that. (81-82;  
Act II)

In an intertextual allusion to Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Grace remarks that "Mr. Vessels is playing the mad scene from *Native Son* ... A second rate Bigger Thomas" (57; Act I). Perhaps Grace refers to Bigger's accidental fear-driven murder of Mary, an innocent and racially tolerant white woman, who has faithfully tried to treat him as an equal human being. Since any white person for Bigger is, by definition, an enemy, frightening, and untrustworthy, the murder gives him a sense of power and self-esteem instead of making him feel guilty.

Violent resistance in Fanon's theory has a positive psychological impact on the oppressed; it has a cathartic role as it purges the psyche of the subjugated from the sense of inferiority and inadequacy inculcated in their minds by their oppressors, implanting instead a sense of self-respect and self-assertion. In Fanon's own words, "violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them and restores their self-confidence" (51). Coinciding with Fanon's point, some critics like Barrios and Burns praise Walker's violence as a liberating force setting him free from the bonds of oppression and enabling him to achieve self-assertion (Barrios 53; Burns 278). Another



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reading of the play suggests, however, that violence is very far from liberating Walker; instead, it adds to the complexity of his situation. His revolutionary violence results not only in the destruction of his white enemy but also in his own self-destruction. His outer violence does not lead to inner peace; he is the victor, but not happy. While he is watching the destruction of his white enemy and integrationist past, he is transformed into the old field slave the play begins with. According to Fanon's theory, a new free spirit should have been born out of the death of Walker's past oppressor, but the old field-slave who appeared in the Prologue dominates the final scene. This circular structure of *The Slave* connotes that no real change has occurred and, by implication, that violence may be a way to vent anger, but not a solution; it is an aftermath of oppression, but not a means to get rid of that oppression. Walker has broken his bondage to whiteness, but he still has the slave mentality. At least, he is enslaved by his hatred. His bonds now are those of hatred and resentment. Grace tells him: "There are so many bulbs and screams shooting off inside you Walker. So many lies you have to pump full of yourself. You're split so many ways. Your feelings are cut up into skinny horrible strips ... you sold the last of your loves and emotions down the river" (61; Act I).

Despite the sense of immutability suggested by the circular ending of the play, Larry Neal argues that the reappearance of the slave figure is a positive ending as it signifies for Walker an identification with his ancestors and assertion of his identity; "a confrontation with history, a final shattering of bullshit illusions ... This is the supreme act of freedom, available only to those who have liberated themselves psychically" (34-35). What Neal disregards is that, from the very beginning, Walker's problem was not one of lack of self-recognition. The appearance of the slave

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figure at the beginning of the play signifies that Walker already knows who he is and where he came from; he clearly connects himself with his slave ancestors and takes them as a symbol of the black revolution he has joined. Besides, the path to freedom requires not only knowing who you are, and where you came from, but also where you are going to and how you will reach there; it requires an agenda, a rational plan for change, and that is what Walker lacks. His revolt is chaotic. “[I]nstead of developing a political concept of Black liberation,” Werner Sollors contends, “Vessels merely follows the impulses of his own love-hate emotions ... This flaw reduces [his] political potential to a nihilistic form of action-for-action’s sake” (136).

Walker’s violence hurts even those whom he loves most, his daughters for whom he has come back: “In spite of all the things I’ve done that helped kill love in me, I still love those girls ... I want those girls very, very much. And I will take them out of here with me” (65-66; Act I). The violence he tends to use randomly prevents Walker from achieving his goal; When Grace – fatally wounded by an explosion that eventually hits the house at the hands of his forces – asks him to “see about the girls,” he asserts that “they’re dead” (87; Act I). According to Jerry Gafio Watts, the fate of Walker’s daughters is ambiguous (83); they could have been killed in the burning house after the explosion or Walker himself could have taken their lives, in an allusion to a desperate action resorted to by some slaves during the slavery era and tragically dramatized by Toni Morrison in *Beloved* (1987), which is the ending of their children’s lives to spare them the fate of slavery. In any case, with this tragic end, violence proves to be neither a liberating nor a cleansing force; instead, it aborts any attempt to effect social

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change, negatively affecting its perpetrators as well as its victims, which gives credibility to Martin Luther King's words:

For practical as well as moral reasons, nonviolence offers the only road to freedom for my people ... Violence, even in self-defense, creates more problems than it solves. Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us toward a community where men can live together without fear. Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives. ("Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom")

The "qualitative change in our souls" King calls for requires a spiritual liberation that enhances self-acceptance and self-sufficiency, and promotes actual liberation through a rational plan for change. That is what is suggested by August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

August Wilson is profoundly influenced by Amiri Baraka, described by Mark Rocha as Wilson's "brother-poet ... who in his quest for a post-white, post-American, post-Western form is the discoverer of the African American literary landscape in which Wilson has found a place" (5). Wilson declares: "My own youth is fired in the kiln of black cultural nationalism as exemplified by Amiri Baraka in the sixties" (*Three Plays* ix). Like Baraka, Wilson considers artistic separatism a mirror of national liberation. His subtle use of Black Vernacular, folk materials, black mythology, black rituals, and black music – particularly the Blues – as

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significant motifs in his works, reveals his insistence upon getting free from the dominant western literary forms and aesthetic conventions.

While freedom of African Americans is the central preoccupation of both Baraka and Wilson, it is achieved in Wilson's plays through black-black communication, not black-white confrontation. Concerned more with blacks themselves rather than with their white oppressors, Wilson puts less emphasis on what Kimberly Benston calls "the face-to-face encounter that constitutes a primal scene in African American literature: the confrontation with the face of mastery" (100). His theatre, though still political and rebellious, is less militant than the revolutionary theatre of the 1960s, referred to by Baraka as "a political theatre, a weapon to help the slaughter of these dimwitted fatbellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 131). This revolutionary spirit is toned down in Wilson's plays where white characters are pushed to the margin and occur only offstage. As he looks inward instead of outward in his exploration of the human costs of racism (Herrington 4), we hardly find any of Wilson's characters engaged in launching curses and tossing threats against their oppressors, as it is the case with Baraka's. The sense of anger and protest which is a common trope in African American literature is reflected in the works of August Wilson in questions of inner spiritual conflicts and communal ties.

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is set during the 1910s, the heyday of the black exodus from the South in search of better living conditions. By that time, the historian Florette Henri asserts, "the black man, especially the black

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southerner, was so bloodily trodden to earth that it did not look as if he could ever again raise his head” (10). Escaping from the humiliation and degradation associated with Jim Crow laws, Southern blacks began their mass migration to Northern cities searching for freedom and self-affirmation. As one migrant declared in a letter to *The Chicago Defender*, blacks left the South wishing to live “where a man is a man” (Scott 298). A lot of the migrants discovered later that they had been running after an illusory hope; the great migration was proved so far from being a solution to the historic injustice blacks had suffered from in the South. John R. Burch maintains with documentary evidence that “their lot was not significantly improved. Many of the jobs were low paying. The migrants were forced to live in urban ghettos due to blatant housing discrimination. The influx of African Americans in Urban centers was also often accompanied by the passage of Jim Crow legislation in their new neighborhoods” (133). During these early years of the twentieth century, a debate concerning black liberation strategies – similar to that aroused later between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King – was set off between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. While Washington urged passive resistance and gradual change based on economic independence and self-sufficiency, Dubois recommended political action and militant protest. Washington’s path is the one endorsed in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*.

Set in a boardinghouse in Pittsburgh through which a number of black people come and go, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* stresses the homelessness and restlessness of blacks during the 1910s. The boardinghouse is a metaphor for transience signifying that the characters are not settled in their lives yet. They are all displaced wanderers searching for something, and the boardinghouse is only a station in

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their journey. While their literal search is for a job, economic security, fair treatment, a lost mate, or a longed-for-love, their real search is for a sense of freedom and self-determination.

Keeping with the fragmentation which is part of these characters’ lives, the play aptly deviates from the traditional plot structure; it is composed of successive overlapping narratives, “a string of expository scenes where everything has the quality of an announcement” (Fleche 13). With a boardinghouse as its setting, it makes sense that the play is made of a series of comings and goings and subsequent diverse stories folded together into one play that reveals what Sandra Shannon calls a “patchwork of episodes in the lives of post-Reconstruction blacks as they attempt to start new lives” (120). The central character among these people is Harold Loomis, a thirty-two-year-old Southern black man who comes to Seth Holly’s boardinghouse in search of his wife, Martha. As the play moves on, we learn that almost ten years before the play proper begins, Loomis was illegally imprisoned by Joe Turner, a plantation owner and one of the white authorities whose habit was to seize blacks arbitrarily and imprison them for seven years as a free workforce. That Loomis was forced into a slave-like servitude on a southern plantation in the twentieth century asserts again that the de jure emancipation of blacks in 1866 was not genuine as it did not materialize in the minds of white masters.

Through integrating Joe Turner – a white figure in Black folklore and the motif of a blues song titled “Joe Turner’s come and gone” – as a living white villain into his play, Wilson links his 1910s drama to the whole past of blacks in America since they were uprooted from Africa.

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The seven years Loomis is under the clutches of Joe Turner stand for the three hundred years of slavery. The play can thus be seen as an allegorical panorama of Black America. Loomis was finally released to find that his wife had left for the North, leaving her daughter behind with her grandmother. For four years, he has been walking up and down the roads with his daughter searching for his wife. As the play begins, he is in the fourth year searching, not only for his wife, but also for his lost identity, his pride, his manhood, and – most importantly – his freedom.

Through Loomis's interaction with the other black residents in the boardinghouse, Wilson inserts an agenda for change that relies on a rational scheme and specific strategies that can pave the way to freedom for black Americans, with no mention of violence as a potential path. Through the characters of Jeremy and Seth, for instance, economic liberation and self-sufficiency are proposed as indispensable liberation strategies. Jeremy is a 25-year-old Southern black, a proficient guitar player who came to Pittsburgh with nothing but a guitar and a hope that he will fulfill himself in the Northern city. In the urban jungle, however, Jeremy is easily victimized by city predators. He is frequently harassed by the policemen for no particular offence and has to pay them to be released. Since his musical talent is not enough to support him financially, Jeremy has to work on roads with wages that are hardly enough for his food and rent. Even here, he is still subject to white exploitation; he has to give part of his weekly wages to a bullying foreman in order to keep the job.

As Seth, the owner of the boardinghouse, suggests, Jeremy cannot be free without economic liberation. Seth stands in sharp contrast to the other characters as a perfect

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example of a settled black who knows what he wants. Unlike those characters who are the product of broken relationships and always threatened by abject poverty, he enjoys a stable family life and has a stable income. Part of his stability is due to the fact that – with a craft and a strict work ethic that make him self-sufficient – he does not have to depend on the white man for income. He has multiple income streams: renting rooms in the boardinghouse, crafting cookware, planting vegetables for sale, and working in a factory. He has a dream of launching an independent enterprise with his fellow blacks that can liberate them from the dependency complex. He says to his wife:

You take the boy, Jeremy. What he gonna do after he put in that road? He can't do nothing but go put in another one somewhere. Now, if he let me show him how to make some pots and pans ... then he'd have something can't nobody take away from him. After a while he could get his own tools and go off somewhere and make his own pots and pans ... I get me five men with some tools and we'd have to open up a store somewhere. (43-44; Act I, Sc. 3)

Seth's words reiterate Booker T. Washington's argument in "The Case of the Negro" that "[t]he man who has learned to do something better than anyone else ... has power and influence which no adverse surroundings can take from him." (582). This idea coincides with Franklin Roosevelt's assertion that "[t]rue individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. People who are hungry



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and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made” (qtd. in Yamato).

Another liberation strategy proposed in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is retrieving cultural identity as a key to agency and self-possession. Cultural retention and racial pride in Wilson’s play substitute the violence promoted by Fanon’s theory and incited in *The Slave* as a means to implant self-respect and erase the inferiority complex felt by the oppressed. Wilson urges a reconnection to Africa, spiritually established through recognition of and pride in African heritage, “even though the linguistic environment teaches that black is all these negative things” (Moyers 173). Through the character of Bynum, he emphasizes that African Americans could not live authentically without such reconnection. He describes Bynum as “[a] Conjure man ... He seems to be lost in a world of his own making and to swallow any adversity or interference with his grand design” (4; Act I, Sc. 1). As a conjurer, Bynum is closer to his African roots than the other more acculturated characters (Tucker 176). His maintenance of African folkloric rituals reflects what Trudier Harris refers to as the main components of African American history, including,

strategies for survival, ways of manipulating a hostile Anglo American environment, and a world view that posited the potential for goodness prevailing in spite of the harshness of American racism and the exclusion of blacks from American democracy and the American dream. African American folklore ... revealed the willingness of blacks to trust their own sense of reality instead of allowing the crucial

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parts of their existence to be defined by others.  
(49)

Unlike traditional conjure men who claim magical ability to change people’s fortunes, Bynum is delineated as a spiritual healer helping people to feel inner freedom. He bears resemblance to Mama Day, the conjure woman in Gloria Naylor’s novel *Mama Day* (1988). Naylor maintains that “Mama is about the fact that the real basic magic is the unfolding of the human potential and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles” (Carabi 121). The same applies to Bynum who takes upon himself to help desperate people discover the power within their own selves. To him, it is an attempt to help them find their “song.” One’s song is a metaphor recurrently used in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* – standing for one’s identity and inner power – as an incantation for self-liberation. Socio-economic, cultural, and political change is certainly a far more sophisticated issue, which may render the liberation strategy promoted in the play a utopian dreamlike vision. Nevertheless, certain successful social movements like that of Gandhi, referred to by anthropologist David Aberle as “redemptive movements” (qtd. In McAdam and Snow 3), are based on the belief that changing society should begin at the individual level through spiritual growth and inner change. Accordingly, the inner liberation symbolized by espousing one’s song in *Joe Turner* can be taken as the first step on a long road towards social and political liberation.

Bynum exerts a positive influence almost upon all the characters in the play, but his most significant mark is on Loomis who is seen by the other boarders as an abnormal character. “Something ain’t right with that fellow,” says Seth

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(20; Act 1, Sc. 1). Indeed, Loomis's experience with bondage has damaged him psychologically; his character dramatizes the relationship between oppression, alienation from self and alienation from others. Unable to form bonds or to interact casually anymore, he is always on guard, rarely talks, never initiates conversations and his answers are concise. Though physically released, he is still spiritually enslaved with extreme feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. Joe Turner still captures part of his soul which he needs to retrieve in order to be internally free. In a psychological analysis of the main character in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Mary Bogumil argues that Loomis is both the protagonist and antagonist of the play, a view that seems reasonable if we take into consideration that the protagonist-antagonist relationship in modern drama is sometimes ambiguous. Instead of clear-cut characters, we mostly have multi-dimensional ones, and we can find two binary opposites in the same character. Loomis is the play's protagonist whose goal is freedom and self-fulfillment. By definition, the antagonist represents the opposition against which the protagonist must wrestle to achieve their goal. In the case of Loomis, it is his own psychological inability to let go of the pain of the past that provides the element of opposition. Joe Turner no longer exists in his life, but he has to fully recover from the psychological wound Turner has caused him before he can achieve his goal and live authentically. Both the goal and the opposition are thus included within the main character, which proves Bogumil's belief that "Loomis is an unwilling, self-imposed Joe Turner" whose salvation lies in his ability to "confront his own demons" (473- 74).

To break his spiritual deadlock, Loomis has to retrieve the song that Joe Turner wanted to suppress within

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him. While he is ashamed of his bondage experience and tries doggedly to hide it, Bynum confronts him saying: "I can tell you one of Joe Turner's niggers. Cause you forgot how to sing your song" (71; Act II, Sc. 2). It is the song of self that makes a man proud of who he is, as well as the singing spirit which enabled generations of African Americans to defy the horrors of slavery and lift up from the burdens of bondage to a free spiritual sphere of their own. It is the spirit which Maya Angelou celebrates in her poem "Caged Bird." Unlike the free bird who "names the sky his own," the caged bird "stands on the grave of dreams .../His wings are clipped and his feet are tied/ so he opens his throat to sing." The caged bird sings

With fearful trill  
Of the things unknown  
But longed for still  
And his tune is heard  
On the distant hill  
For the caged bird  
Sings of freedom. (194- 95)

According to Trudier Harris, "What Loomis needs [is] ... the transcendent spirit of laughter and song, broadly interpreted, that will enable him to survive." If Joe Turner, "can suppress that alternative vision, that innate sense of trusting one's own reality, that singing spirit, then he can destroy a race of people without killing a single one of them" (57-58). Without his song, Loomis loses the authority to claim his freedom. He thus needs to dredge the depths of his tormented spirit in order to bring this song out and live in tune with its rhythm.

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The first step toward Loomis's rediscovery of his song is to reread his own and his ancestors' history and stop defining himself according to Joe Turner's view. The Juba dance in which the other boarders participate helps awaken his racial consciousness which has been benumbed. It "is reminiscent," Wilson writes, "of the Ring Shouts of the African Slaves. It is a call and response dance ... It should be as African as possible, with the performers working themselves up into a near frenzy" (52; Act I, Sc. 4). In the spirit of the Juba, they are creating a sense of communal solidarity and pride in their African culture as a source of spiritual regeneration in the face of fragmentation and dislocation. The mystical climate created by the Juba fires the battle within Loomis's soul, encouraging him to narrate an apocalyptic vision that reflects an individual trauma as well as a collective rememory: "I done seen bones rise up out the water ... They come up out the water and started marching ... Only they ain't bones no more. They got flesh on them! Just like you and me! ... They ain't moved or nothing. They just laying there. I'm laying there ... waiting" (53-54; Act I, Sc. 4).

These bones recall the people of the Middle Passage (Pettengill 251); the forced voyage which brought millions of Africans thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean to America. It "denotes an unbelievable descent into an earthly hell of cruelty and suffering" (Hine et al 32). Mortality rates were then extremely high because of the inhumane and unsanitary conditions on the slave cargo ships. It is estimated that "one-third of the Africans subjected to the trade perished between their capture and their embarkation on a slave ship. Another third died during the middle passage" (Hine et al 32). Thus, somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean lie the bones of

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millions of Africans who breathed their last before reaching the New World.

The Middle Passage is not only a historic site of loss and death, but also of struggle and survival. According to Harry Elam, Loomis's vision of bones walking and turning into living flesh reflects a remarkable dichotomy of life and death paralleling "those perilous journeys aboard slave ships that marked both death and new life, that ensured the profound disconnection from, as well as the endurance of, the spirit of Africa, that initiated the complex gestation and difficult birth of African Americans" (3). For all the pain and loss in their experience, African Americans, as revealed in Loomis's vision, are able to find a way out of the labyrinth they were hemmed in, to stand up again, to be united, and to transfer fear into freedom: "Everybody's standing up at the same time ... They shaking hands and saying goodbye to each other and walking every which way down the road" (56; Act I, Sc. 4). As Douglas Anderson argues, "Loomis's vision is one which affirms the presence of agency in the African-American past, suggesting that it is not only one of victimization alone, but of agency and self-empowerment. The vision suggests, moreover, that even the history of victimization can be and has been redeemed" (453- 54). Once Loomis recognizes this, he begins to restore his sense of life; he feels he has to join his ancestors in their march, "I'm starting to breathe again. ... I'm gonna stand up. I got to stand up. I can't lay here no more" (55; Act I, Sc. 4).

This spiritual revelation would enable Loomis to break all the shackles that have stifled his sense of freedom for so long, one of which is the belief that only on finding his wife he would be able to restore his old image of himself as

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a free man. The play ends with Loomis reconciled, not to his lost wife, but to himself. When he already finds Martha, he seeks no reunion, recognizing that they have become spiritually incompatible. Martha is a faithful Christian while Loomis has lost his faith in traditional Christianity and feels a need to liberate himself from a religious dogma that has been imposed upon him without inner conviction. As she tries to convince him to restore his belief in the Lord and his blessings, he launches – in a long speech fraught with figurative language – an attack against what he feels to be the “racism” of Jesus Christ:

I done been all across the valleys and the hills and the mountains and the oceans ... And all I seen was a bunch of niggers dazed out of their wooly heads. And Mr. Jesus Christ standing there in the middle of them, grinning ... *Great big old white man* ... Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. And he counting ... ‘Well, Jeremiah ... what’s the matter, you ain’t picked but two hundred pounds of cotton today? Got to put you on half rations.’ And Jeremiah go back and lay up there on his half rations and talk about what a nice man Mr. Jesus Christ is ‘cause he give him salvation after he die ... I done been baptized with blood of the lamb and the fire of the Holy Ghost. But what I got, huh? I got salvation? My enemies all around me picking the flesh from my bones. I’m choking on my own blood and all you got to give me is salvation?’ (92-93; Act II, Sc. 5; emphasis mine)

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Clearly, Loomis associates Christianity and Jesus Christ with the acts of white oppressors who masked the reality of their oppression beneath the veil of Christianity, quoting the scriptures to justify their subjugation of blacks and induce the latter to endure such subjugation with promises of salvation. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," James Baldwin postulates a similar connection between Christianity and slavery, attributing the conversion of Africans to Christianity to "the zeal of those alabaster missionaries to Africa to cover the nakedness of the natives, to hurry them into the pallid arms of Jesus and thence into slavery" (20). Likewise, Malcolm X argues that "[t]he Holy Bible in the white man's hands and his interpretations of it have been the greatest single ideological weapon for enslaving millions of non-white human beings" (Autobiography 257).

Loomis's alienation from Christianity can be attributed as well to a basic concept in conventional Christianity concerning the status of Jesus Christ. Discussing what he calls "the Christian Dilemma," Lincoln writes, "Our crisis seems to derive from an idolatrous confusion of God with man" (20); it is believed that God is personified in Jesus Christ, whose image displayed in churches is obviously white. Some blacks, hence, see Christianity as a white man's religion with a white man's God. They could not identify with a white image as the personification of their God. Commenting on this dilemma, August Wilson says:

What you do is worship 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 the slave ships, who have  
beaten you, and who have forced you to work.



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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. Loomis in Joe Turner rejects the image of Christianity. We're talking about image, not the religion—there's nothing wrong with the religion. It has great principles if it's practiced. (Moyers 178)

Such image represents bondage for Loomis. Instead of what he perceives as the “white man’s God” of Christianity, he seeks everybody’s God whose force is felt within all creatures. Reggie Young aptly notes that “[t]he conceptual God who is the desired object of worship by the characters in this play is neither ... black nor white ... It is not a god of a socially constructed, racialized hue ... nothing like the enslaving figure of god forced upon them by a nation of Joe Turners” (134). Wilson makes a point that Loomis is finally completely able to set himself free from all the burdens that bind his soul when he is able to discern the force of God within him, when he understands that “his existence is the manifest act of the creator. Therefore he has to be filled with God’s majesty” (Grant 108). He explodes with wrathful rejection when Martha says: “You got to be washed with the blood of the lamb ... Jesus bled for you. He’s the Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world.” Loomis dismisses this belief: “I don’t need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself.” He immediately “slashes himself across the chest” and “rubs the blood over his face.” Bleeding for himself, he finally asserts his self-sufficiency. We are then told in a stage direction that “[h]aving found his song, the song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh, having accepted responsibility for his

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presence in the world, he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirits into terrifying contractions" (93-94; Act.2, Sc. 5).

At the end of the play, Loomis is able to tell people that Joe Turner has come and forever gone: "Everywhere I go people wanna bind me up. Joe Turner wanna bind me up. Reverend Toliver wanna bind me up. Everybody wanna bind me up ... Well, Joe Turner's come and gone and Herald Loomis ain't for no binding. I ain't gonna let nobody bind me up!" (91; Act II, Sc. 5). These final words signal the beginning of a new life. Loomis is now free from all the physical and psychological chains which have been binding him. Once he is able to achieve such spiritual emancipation, the opportunity for a new beginning is offered to him through Mattie Campbell who rushes out after him when he exits. As they both are thirsty for love and stability, they can help each other heal the wounds of the past and establish a healthy relationship that promises liberation, not restriction.

The dramatic works of both Amiri Baraka and August Wilson proves that art is not only an aesthetic creation used to entertain or elevate the sense of beauty; art has the power to guide, to heal, and to provoke change. *The Slave* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* reveal the playwrights' dedication to enlighten their people and usher them into the realm of freedom. Yet, while freedom is the main goal of the protagonist in both plays, different strategies are propagated to achieve this goal. Whereas *The Slave* seems to invoke violence, militant revolt, bloody encounters, and revenge, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* urges self-determination, self-sufficiency, and inner spiritual liberation as the main path to freedom. While *The Slave* offers no agenda for change, *Joe*

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*Turner's Come and Gone* offers a whole system of change based on group solidarity, economic empowerment, careful organization, cultural retention, self-reliance, and empowering the self instead of fighting the other.

The protagonist of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is the one eventually able to enjoy a sense of real freedom while that of *The Slave* remains bound by feelings of hatred, grudges, and insistence upon revenge. *The Slave* has a sad ending with the mysterious death of Walker's daughters, whereas *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* ends happily with Loomis finding his true self and a promising life partner. Putting the ends of the two plays in juxtaposition, it becomes evident that violence may be an aftermath of oppression, but not a way out of the labyrinth of such oppression. It is through the moral force of nonviolence and peaceful resistance – not violence or mindless killing – that freedom is to be attained, sooner or later.

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