

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Synopsis

Joe Turner's Come and Gone, set in 1917, is the story of Harold Loomis who returns to Pittsburgh in search of his wife. He is haunted by the memory of bounty hunter Joe Turner, the man who had illegally enslaved him. Loomis is unable to fully embrace or release the past. His search brings him to Seth and Bertha's boardinghouse with his young daughter, Zonia, where "conjure man" Bynum shows him that he really is searching for himself.

Characters

BERTHA HOLLY: Seth's wife of 25 years and 5 years his junior. She knows her place in the hierarchy of the boardinghouse, yet still has some say in the decision making and will often voice her opinion. A very loving mother to the boardinghouse family. In the end, she tells Mattie that the only two things you need in your life are love and laughter; the things that she has had faith in and have helped her get by.

HERALD LOOMIS: A resident of the boardinghouse. Having been enslaved by Joe Turner for seven years, Loomis has completely lost his way in life. An odd man that dons an overcoat and hat in mid-August, Loomis is 32 years old and a displaced slave searching for his wife. In the end he finds his song, an independent, self-sufficient song that he can sing proudly.

MARTHA LOOMIS PENTECOST: Herald Loomis's wife. She is about 28, very religious and a member of the Evangelical church. She left the South and her daughter behind. She does what it takes to ensure her self-preservation and remains a strong, self-sufficient woman until the end.

RUTHERFORD SELIG: A peddler. Known as the "People Finder," he is the only white character in the play. Selig is from a family that first brought Africans across the Atlantic to become slaves, but now he unites people by recording the names and places of all the people he peddles to.

JEREMY FURLOW: A resident of the boardinghouse, he is 25 years old. He represents a younger generation seeking to find its identity as the first liberated slaves. Jeremy's "blues playing" character is classified as a suave, artist young man looking to make a quick buck and travel the nation. He is constantly seeking the attention of the women in his vicinity and tries to find the perfect girl for himself.

SETH HOLLY: Owner of the boardinghouse in his early fifties. Born of free African-American parents in the North, he is set in his ways; never losing his composure and always running a respectable house. He even condemns other African-Americans that do not follow this kind of lifestyle. He is economically very capitalistic and does whatever is necessary to stay afloat; including working night shifts and odd craftsman jobs he can pick up from Selig. He understands his world on a very literal level, and doesn't aspire to become more than he is.

BYNUM WALKER: A rootworker in his late sixties. A "conjure" man staying with the Holly's at the boardinghouse, Bynum is one of few characters that understands his own identity. Convinced of the fact that everyone has their own song, Bynum perpetuates the theme of identity and our constant search for it.

ZONIA LOOMIS: Herald's daughter, she is a tall and skinny 11-year-old. She represents the next innocent, malleable generation. There is a sense that history will repeat itself if the proceeding generation is not taught differently.

REUBEN MERCER: A boy who lives next door. Reuben represents the repetitiveness of history. Even as an adolescent, Reuben is aware of his place in society, notices the spiritual differences of people around him, and decides at a very early age that he needs a woman to settle down with and marry. Many of the ideals that are seen in the adult characters of this play are instilled in Reuben and will repeat, the good and the bad, as he grows into adulthood.

MOLLY CUNNINGHAM: A resident. She is a good looking young woman of 26 who is strong and independent. Unwilling to let herself be told what to do by anyone, Molly is convinced that she will never return to the South and refuses to be associated with anything that her old life entailed.

MATTIE CAMPBELL: A tenant of Seth's, she is disappointed in her place in life and looking for love and children. She arrives at Seth's seeking Bynum's help to "bind" her former boyfriend with whom she had two babies who died.

Code: 10-01
Time: 1:40
Type 1: Dramatic
Type 2: Relationships
Type 3: Love

Act 2; Scene 3

BERTHA HOLLY

If I was you, Mattie, I wouldn't go getting all tied up with Bynum in that stuff. That kind of stuff, even if it do work for a while, it don't last. That just get people more mixed up than they is already. And I wouldn't waste my time fretting over Jeremy either. I seen it coming. I seen it when she first come here. She that kind of woman run off with the first man got a dollar to spend on her. Jeremy just young. He don't know what he getting into. That gal don't mean him no good. She's just using him to keep from being by herself. That's the worst use of a man you can have. You ought to be glad to wash him out of your hair. I done seen all kind of men. I done seen them come and go through here. Jeremy ain't had enough to him for you. You need a man who's got some understanding and who willing to work with that understanding to come to the best he can. You got your time coming. You just tries too hard and can't understand why it don't work for you. Trying to figure it out don't do nothing but give you a troubled mind. Don't no man want a woman with a troubled mind.

You get all that trouble off your mind and just when it look like you ain't never gonna find what you want...you look up and it's standing right there. That's how I met my Seth. You gonna look up one day and find everything you want standing right in front of you. Been twenty-seven years now since that happened to me. But life ain't no happy-go-lucky time where everything be just like you want it. You got your time coming. You watch what Bertha's saying.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-02
Time: 2:00
Type 1: Dramatic
Type 2: Separation
Type 3: Value of Life

Act 2; Scene 2

HERALD LOOMIS

Had a whole mess of men he caughted. Just go out hunting regular like you go out hunting possum. He catch you and go home to his wife and family. Ain't thought about you going home to yours. Joe Tuner caughted me when my little girl was just born. Wasn't nothing but a little baby sucking on her mama's titty when he caughted me. Joe Turner caughted me in nineteen hundred and one. Kept me seven years until nineteen hundred and eight. Kept everybody seven years. He'd go out hunting and bring back forty men at a time. And keep them seven years.

I was walking down this road in this little town out side of Memphis. Come up on these fellows gambling. I was a deacon in the Abundant Life Church. I stopped to preach to these fellows to see if maybe I could turn some of them from their sinning when Joe Turner, brother of the Governor of the great sovereign state of Tennessee, swooped down on us and grabbed everybody there. Kept us all seven years.

My wife Martha gone from me after Joe Turner caughted me. Got out from under Joe Turner on his birthday. Me and forty other men put in our seven years and he let us go on his birthday. I made it back to Henry Thompson's place where me and Martha was sharecropping and Martha's gone. She taken my little girl and left her with her mama and took off North. We been looking for her ever since. That's been going on four years now we been looking. That's the only think I know to do. I just wanna see her face so I can get me a starting place in the world. The world got to start somewhere. That's what I been looking for. I been wandering a long time in somebody else's world. When I find my wife that be the making of my own.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-03
Time: 1:20
Type 1: Dramatic
Type 2: Separation
Type 3: Good-bye

Act 2; Scene 5

HERALD LOOMIS

I just been waiting to look on your face to say my good- bye. That good-bye got so big at times, seem like it was gonna swallow me up. Like Jonah in the whale's belly I sat up in that good-bye for three years. That good-bye kept me out on the road searching. Not looking on women in their houses. It kept me bound up to the road. All the time that good-bye swelling up in my chest till I'm about to bust. Now that I see your face I can say my good-bye and make my own world.

(LOOMIS takes ZONIA's hand and presents her to MARTHA.)

Martha... here go your daughter. I tried to take care of her. See that she had something to eat. See that she was out of the elements. Whatever I know I tried to teach her. Now she need to learn from her mother whatever you got to teach her. That way she won't be no one-sided person.

(LOOMIS stoops to ZONIA)

Zonia, you go on live with your mama. She a good woman. You go on with her and listen to her good. You my daughter and I love you like a daughter. I hope to see you again in the world somewhere. I'll never forget you.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-04
Time: 1:45
Type 1: Dramatic
Type 2: Separation
Type 3: Relationships

Act 2; Scene 5

MARTHA LOOMIS PENTECOST

I didn't leave her motherless, Herald. Reverend Tolliver wanted to move the church up North 'cause of all the trouble the colored folks was having down there. Nobody knew what was gonna happen traveling them roads. We didn't even know if we was gonna make it up here or not. I left her with my mama so she be safe. That was better than dragging her out on the road having to duck and hide from people. Wasn't no telling what was gonna happen to us. I didn't leave her motherless in the world. I been looking for you.

Herald, I didn't know if you was ever coming back. They told me Joe Turner had you and my whole world split half in two. My whole life shattered. It was like I had poured it in a cracked jar and it all leaked out the bottom. When it go like that there ain't nothing you can do put it back together. You talking about Henry Thompson's place like I'm still gonna be working the land by myself. How I'm gonna do that? You wasn't gone but two months and Henry Thompson kicked me off his land and I ain't had no place to go but to my mama's. I stayed and waited there for five years before I woke up one morning and decided that you was dead. Even if you weren't, you was dead to me. I wasn't gonna carry you with me no more. So I killed you in my heart. I buried you. I mourned you. And then I picked up what was left and went on to make life without you. I was a young woman with life at my beckon. I couldn't drag you behind me like a sack of cotton.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-05
Time: 3:00
Type 1: Serio-Comedic
Type 2: Family
Type 3: Separation

Act 1; Scene 2

RUTHERFORD SELIG

I'll tell you, mister... you better off without them. Now you take me...old Rutherford Selig could tell you a thing or two about these women. I ain't met one yet I could understand. Now, you take Sally out there. That's all a man needs is a good horse. I say giddup and she go. Say whoa and she stop. I feed her some oats and she carry me wherever I want to go. Ain't had a speck of trouble out of her since I had her. Now, I been married. A long time ago down in Kentucky. I got up one morning and I saw this look on my wife's face. Like way down deep inside her she was wishing I was dead. I walked around that morning and every time I looked at her she had that look on her face. It seem like she knew I could see it on her. Every time I looked at her I got smaller and smaller. Well, I wasn't gonna stay around there and just shrink away. I walked out on the porch and closed the door behind me. When I closed the door she locked it. I went out and bought me a horse. And I ain't been without one since! Martha Loomis, huh? Well, now I'll do the best I can do.

Well, now it ain't no easy job like you think. You can't just go out there and find them like that. There's a lot of little tricks to it. It's not an easy job keeping up with you Nigras the way you move about so. Now you take this woman you looking for... this Martha Loomis. She could be anywhere. Time I find her, if you don't keep your eye on her, she'll be gone off someplace else. You'll be thinking she over here and she'll be over there. But like I say there's a lot of little tricks to it.

I can't promise anything but we been finders in my family for a long time. Bringers and finders. My great-granddaddy used to bring Nigras across the ocean

on ships. That wasn't no easy job either. Sometimes the winds would blow so hard you'd think the hand of God was set against the sails. But it set him well in pay and he settled in this new land and found him a wife of good Christian charity with a mind for kids and the like and well... here, I am, Rutherford Selig. You're in good hands, mister. Me and my daddy have found plenty Nigras. My daddy, rest his soul, used to find runaway slaves for the plantation bosses. He was the best there was at it. Jonas B. Selig. Had him a reputation stretched clean across the country. After Abraham Lincoln give you all Nigras your freedom papers and with you all looking all over for each other... we started finding Nigras for Nigras. Of course, it don't pay as much. But the People Finding business ain't so bad.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-06
Time: 1:45
Type 1: Comedic
Type 2: Exploitation
Type 3: Music

Act 1; Scene 1

JEREMY FURLLOW

I don't play no contest, Mr. Bynum. Had one of them white fellows cure me of that. I ain't been nowhere near a contest since.

I was sitting at home just fixing to sit down and eat when somebody come up to my house and got me. Told me there's a white fellow say he was gonna give a prize to the best guitar player he could find. I take up my guitar and go down there and somebody had gone up and got Bobo Smith and brought him down there. Him and another fellow called Hooter. Old Hooter couldn't play no guitar, he do more hollering than playing, but Bobo could go at it a while.

This fellow standing there say he the one that was gonna give the prize and me and Bobo started playing for him. Bobo play something and then I'd try to play something better than what he played. Old Hooter, he just holler and bang at the guitar. Man was the worst guitar player I ever seen. So me and Bobo played and after a while I seen where he was getting the attention of this white fellow. He'd play something and while he was playing it he be slapping on the side of the guitar, and that made it sound like he was playing more than he was. So I started doing it too. White fellow ain't knew no difference. He ain't knew as much about guitar playing as Hooter did. After we play awhile, the white fellow called us to him and he said he couldn't make up his mind, say all three of us was the best guitar player and we'd have to spilt the prize between us. Then he give us twenty-five cents. That's eight cents a piece and a penny on the side. That cured me of playing contest to this day.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-07
Time: 1:00
Type 1: Serio-Comedic
Type 2: Societal Order
Type 3:

Act 1, Scene 1

SETH HOLLY

These niggers coming up here with that old backward country style of living. It's hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting. Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish-acting niggers. Word get out they need men to work in the mill and put in these roads... and niggers drop everything and head North looking for freedom. They don't know the white fellows looking too. White fellow coming from all over the world. White fellows come over and in six months got more than what I got. But these niggers keep on coming. Walking... riding... carrying their Bibles. That boy done carried a guitar all the way from North Carolina. What he gonna find out? What he gonna do with that guitar? This the city.

(There is a knock at the door.)

Niggers coming up here from the back woods... coming up here from the country carrying Bibles and guitars looking for freedom. They got a rude awakenin.

Code: 10-08
Time: 2:25
Type 1: Dramatic
Type 2: Premonition
Type 3: Value of Life

Act1; Scene 1

BYNUM WALKER

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

He say he had a voice inside him telling him which way to go and if I come and go along with him he was gonna show me the Secret of Life. Quite naturally I followed him. A fellow that's gonna show you the Secret of Life ain't to be taken lightly. We get near this bend in the road...

Turn around that bend and everything look like it was twice as big as it was. The trees and everything bigger than life! Sparrows big as eagles! I turned around to look at this fellow and he had this light coming out of him. I had to cover up my eyes to keep from being blinded. He shining like new money with that light. He shined until all the light seemed like it seeped out of him and then he was gone and I was by myself in this strange place where everything was bigger than life.

I wandered around there looking for that road, trying to find my way back from this big place... and I looked over and seen my daddy standing there. My daddy called me to him. Said he had been thinking about me and it grieved him to see me

in the world carrying other people's songs and not having one of my own. Told me he was gonna show me how to find my song. Then he carried me further into this big place until we come to this ocean. Then he showed me something I ain't got words to tell you. But if you stand to witness it, you done seen something there. I stayed in that place awhile and my daddy taught me the meaning of this thing that I had seen and showed me how to find my song. I asked him about the shiny man and he told me he was the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way. Said there was lots of shiny men and if I ever saw one again before I died then I would know that my song had been accepted and worked its full power in the world and I could lay down and die a happy man. A man who done left his mark on life.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-09
Time: 1:20
Type 1: Dramatic
Type 2: Conjuring
Type 3: Relationships

Act 1; Scene 1

BYNUM WALKER

The roots is a powerful thing. I can fix it so one day he'll walk out his front door... won't be thinking of nothing. He won't know what it is. All he knows is that a power dissatisfaction done set in his bones and can't nothing he do make him feel satisfied. He'll set his foot down on the road and the wind in the trees be talking to him and everywhere he step on the road, that road'll give back your name and something will pull him right up to your doorstep. Now, I can do that. I can take my roots and fix that easy. But maybe he ain't supposed to come back. And if he ain't supposed to come back... then he'll be in your bed one morning and it'll come up on him that he's in the wrong place. That he's lost outside of time from his place that he's supposed to be in. Then both of you be lost and trapped outside of life and ain't no way for you to get back into it. 'Cause you lost from yourselves and where the places come together, where you're supposed to be alive, your heart kicking in your chest with a song worth singing.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-10
Time: 2:40
Type 1: Serio-Comedic
Type 2: Metaphorical
Type 3: Relationships

Act 1; Scene 3

BYNUM WALKER

You just can't look at it like that. You got to look at the whole thing. Now, you take a fellow go out there, grab hold to a woman and think he got something 'cause she sweet and soft to the touch. All right. Touching's part of life. It's in the world like everything else. Touching's nice. It feels good. But you can lay your hand upside a horse or a cat, and that feels good too. What's the difference? When you grab hold to a woman, you got something there. You got a whole world there. You got a way of life kicking up under your hand. That woman can take and make you feel like something. I ain't just talking about in the way of jumping off into bed together and rolling around with each other. Anybody can do that. When you grab hold to that woman and look at the whole thing and see what you got... why she can take and make something out of you. Your mother was a woman. That's enough right there to show you what a woman is. Enough to show you what she can do. She made something out of you. Taught you converse, and all about how to take care of yourself, how to see where you at and where you going tomorrow, how to look out to see what's coming in the way of eating, and what to do with yourself when you get lonesome. That's a mighty thing she did. But you just can't look at a woman to jump off into bed with her. That's a foolish thing to ignore a woman like that.

Alright. Let's try it this way. Now you take a ship. Be out there on the water traveling about. You out there on the ship sailing to and from. And then you see some land. Just like you see a woman walking down the street. You see that land and it don't look like nothing but a line out there on the horizon. That's all it is when you first see it. A line that cross your path out there on the horizon. Now, a smart man know when he see that land, it ain't just a line setting out there. He know that if you get off the water to go take a good look...why there's a whole world right there. A whole world with everything imaginable under the sun.

Anything you can think of you can find on that land. Same with a woman. A woman is everything a man need. That's all he need to live on. You give me some water and berries and if there ain't nothing else I can live a hundred years. See, you just like a man looking at the horizon from a ship. You just seeing a part of it. But it's a blessing when you learn to look at a woman and see in maybe just a few strands of her hair, the way her cheeks curves...to see in that everything there is out of life to be gotten. It's a blessing to see that. You know you done right and proud by your mother to see that. But you got to learn it. My telling you ain't gonna mean nothing. You got to learn how to come to your own time and place with a woman.

Code: 10-11
Time: 2:20
Type 1: Dramatic
Type 2: Value of Life
Type 3: Metaphorical

Act 2; Scene 2

BYNUM WALKER

Mr. Loomis done picked some cotton. Ain't you, Herald Loomis? You done picked a bunch of cotton.

I can tell from looking at you. My daddy taught me how to do that. Say when you look at a fellow, if you taught yourself to look for it, you can see his song written on him. Tell you what kind of man he is in this world. Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is. Forget how he's supposed to mark down life. Now, I used to travel all up and down this road and that...looking here and there. Searching. Just like you, Mr. Loomis. I didn't know what I was searching for. The only thing I knew was something was keeping me dissatisfied. Something wasn't making my heart smooth and easy. Then one day my daddy gave me a song. That song had a weight to it that was hard to handle. That song was hard to carry. I fought against it. Didn't want to accept that song. I tried to find my daddy to give him back the song. But I found out it wasn't his song. It was my song. It had come from way deep inside me. I looked long back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song. I was making it up out of myself. And that song helped me on that road. Made it smooth to where my footsteps didn't bite back at me. All the time that song getting bigger and bigger. That song growing with each step of the road. It got so I used all of myself up in the making of that song. Then I was the song in search of itself. That song rattling in my throat and I'm looking for it. See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song he goes off in search for it...till he find out he's got it with him all the time. That's why I can tell you one of Joe Turner's niggers. 'Cause you forgot how to sing your song.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-12
Time: 1:30
Type 1: Dramatic
Type 2: Death
Type 3: Conjuring

Act 1; Scene 1

REUBEN MERCER

Ain't no kids hardly live around here. I had me a friend but he died. He was the best friend I ever had. Me and Eugene used to keep secrets. I still got his pigeons. He told me to let them go when he died. He say, "Reuben, promise me when I die you'll let my pigeons go." But I keep them to remember him by. I ain't never gonna let them go. Even when I get to be grown up. I'm just always gonna have Eugene's pigeons. (Pause) Mr. Bynum a conjure man. My grandpap scared of him. He don't like me to come over here too much. I'm scared of him too. My grandpap told me not to let him get close enough to where he can reach out his hand out and touch me.

He buys pigeons from me . . . and if you get up early in the morning you can see him out in the yard doing something with them pigeons. My grandpap say he kill them. I sold him one yesterday. I don't know what he do with it. I just hope he don't spook me up.

I just do like Eugene do. He used to sell Mr. Bynum pigeons. That's how he got to collecting them to sell to Mr. Bynum. Sometime he give me a nickel and sometimes he give me a whole dime.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-13
Time: 1:35
Type 1: Dramatic
Type 2: Relationships
Type 3: Family

Act 2; Scene 1

MOLLY CUNNINGHAM

I don't trust none of these men. Jack or nobody else. These men liable to do anything. They wait just until they get one woman tied and locked up with them . . . then they look around to see if they can get another one. Molly don't pay them no mind. One's just as good as the other if you ask me. I ain't never met one that meant nobody no good.

These men make all these babies, then run off and leave you to take care of them. Talking about they wanna see what's on the other side of the hill. I make sure I don't get no babies. My mama taught me how to do that.

Molly Cunningham ain't gonna be tied down with no babies. Had me a man one time who I thought had some love in him. Come home one day and he was packing his trunk. Told me the time come when even the best of friends must part. Say he was gonna send me a Special Delivery some old day. I watched him out the window when he carried that trunk out and down to the train station. Said if he was gonna send me a Special Delivery I wasn't gonna be there to get it. I done found out the harder you try to hold onto them, the easier it is for some gal to pull them away. Molly done learned that. That's why I don't trust nobody but the good Lord above, and I don't love nobody but my mama.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Code: 10-14
Time: 1:10
Type 1: Dramatic
Type 2: Relationships
Type 3: Love

Act 1; Scene 1

MATTIE CAMPBELL

Make him come back to me. Make his feet say my name on the road. I don't care what happens. Make him come back.

He go by Jack Carper. He was born in Alabama then he come to West Texas and find me and we come here. Been here three years before he left. Say I had a curse prayer on me and he started walking down the road and ain't never come back. Somebody told me, say you can fix things like that.

Ain't said nothing. Just started walking. I could see where he disappeared. Didn't look back. Just keep walking. Can't you fix it so he come back? I ain't got no curse prayer on me. I know I ain't.

Me and Jack had two babies. Two little babies that ain't lived two months before they died. He say it's because somebody cursed me not to have babies.

All my life I been looking for somebody to stop and stay with me. I done already got too many things to forget about. I take Jack Carper's hand and it feel so rough and strong. Seem like he's the strongest man in the world the way he hold me. Like he's bigger than the whole world and can't nothing bad get to me. Even when he act mean sometimes he still make everything seem okay with the world. Like there's part of it that belongs just to you. Now you telling me to forget about him?