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威爾森《喬透那來了又去了》的角色塑造詩學

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詢

## 威爾森《喬透那來了又去了》的角色塑造詩學

非裔美國劇作家威爾森(August Wilson 1945-2005)透過戲劇來書寫／匡正非裔美國人歷史的計畫為他贏得了無數美譽。在劇本中，他不但刻畫美國黑人的勤奮和毅力，他也發展出非常獨特的角色塑造。威爾森在《喬透那來了又去了》(1988)的角色塑造和傳統亞里斯多得式角色塑造或其他美國劇作家的角色塑造方法不同，他的角色塑造是富含層次的。除了傳統的角色塑造外，威爾森其實有二種非常獨到、非常特別的角色塑造：隱喻式角色塑造及混合價值式角色塑造。前者是用在像拜南及陸明斯這樣的主要角色身上，這種角色塑造和劇本的主題密切結合，因此這些隱喻式角色的代表意涵也較顯明。後者主要是用在像石德和施洛格等次要角色身上，他們的塑造是為彰顯本戲的主要意涵。然而，就因為這些次要角色所具有的混和評價，或說是，看來較負面的性格成分，觀眾其實較不易捉住這一類角色塑造的特殊意義。本計畫即是研究《喬透那來了又去了》劇中主要人物的隱喻式角色塑造及次要或「負面」人物的多面向角色塑造。這二種角色塑造方式是獨特的威爾森式的，也是很特別的非裔美國式的。主要角色的隱喻式解讀可以替混亂心境的美國黑人帶來些解答，而本戲中次要角色的混雜價值形塑則可清楚的傳達本戲睿智的訊息。威爾森透過次要角色的塑造來帶出教導，因此創新了角色塑造詩學。他讓觀眾可以從一個較有建設性的觀點來看待白人尋人者施若格，也把石德視為一個自由獨立的個人。威爾森多面向的角色塑造給美國戲劇文學增添更多光彩。

關鍵字：非裔美國戲劇、威爾森、《喬透那來了又去了》、角色塑造

## Poetics of Characterization in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

African American playwright August Wilson's (1945-2005) project to write/right African American history via drama has won him resounding fame. He not only demonstrates dedication and perseverance of African Americans in his plays, but he also develops highly unique characterization in his drama. Different from Aristotelian characterization or other American playwrights' characterization, Wilson in his *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) molds his characters in multilayer textures. He has two extraordinary ways of characterization: characterization of metaphor and characterization of mixed values. The former, more applied to the main characters such as Herald Loomis and Bynum Walker in the play, tend to be closely connected to the thematic issues; hence, the meaning of their metaphorical characterization may be grasped directly. The latter, mainly employed for minor characters such as Seth Holly and Rutherford Selig, help elucidate the main message in the play. However, because of their mixed values or ostensibly negative character qualities, spectators may not comprehend the significance of this kind of characterization. This research, therefore, intends to explore the metaphorical characterization of the main characters and the multifarious characterization of the minor or even "villainous" characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. While the metaphorical reading of the major characters may bring forth the solution to the confused African Americans, the mixed-valued characterization of the minor characters indeed consolidates the play's insightful message. Wilson renovates poetics of characterization by allowing minor characters to offer remarks of edification. Hence, he makes his spectators look at the white people finder Selig from a more constructive perspective and to take Seth as a fully free and independent individual. His special way to characterize has indeed enriched the different arrays of American dramatic literature.

Key words: African American drama, Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, characterization

## 報告内容

### Poetics of Characterization in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

#### I. Introduction (前言)

African American playwright August Wilson's (1945-2005) project to write/right African American history via drama has won him resounding fame.<sup>1</sup> He not only demonstrates dedication and perseverance of African Americans in his plays, but he also develops highly unique characterization in his drama. Different from Aristotelian characterization or other American playwrights' characterization, Wilson in his *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) molds his characters in multilayer textures.

Though a high school drop-out, Wilson was a very hardworking self-taught playwright,<sup>2</sup> tremendously influenced by great western dramatists such as Shakespeare and other masters. Wilson's plays therefore are very much in line with Aristotelian realistic characterization; however, Wilson is definitely adept in creating characters who are authentically real to that particular decade (for example, the 1910s in the case of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*) and significantly revealing to spectators now.

#### II. Research Objective (研究目的)

In addition to traditional characterization, Wilson has two extraordinary ways of characterization: characterization of metaphor and characterization of mixed values. The former, more applied to the main characters such as Herald Loomis and Bynum Walker and a minor character—Bertha Holly, tend to be connected to the thematic issues; hence, the meaning of their metaphorical characterization may be grasped directly. The latter, mainly employed for minor characters such as Seth Holly and Rutherford Selig, help elucidate the main message in the play. However, because of their mixed values or ostensibly negative character qualities, spectators may not comprehend the significance of this kind of mixed-valued characterization right away. Wilson's play is also teemed with three other minor characters Jeremy Furlow, Mattie Campbel, and Molly Cunningham, and two children characters, Reuben and Zonia, but these characters tend to be less significant for their loss of self or young age. This paper, therefore, intends to explore the metaphorical characterization of the main characters and the multifarious characterization of the minor or even “villainous” characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. These two kinds of characterization are uniquely Wilsonian, and African American par excellence.

#### III. Literature Review (文献探討)

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<sup>1</sup> For the critical acclaim and the canonical recognition Wilson secured in American drama, please see Wolfe's *August Wilson*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> For the life of August and Wilson and more detail about his drop-out, see Snodgrass's *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*. Pp. 7-8.

After the play has been written in 1988, most critics have paid more attention to the thematic issues in the play. For example, because of “the spiritual insights,” Harold Bloom regards *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* as August Wilson’s “strongest” play (Bloom n.p.). While critic Bogumil thinks the theme of this play is displacement (52), Morales stresses “establishing kinship” (112). Comparatively speaking, few critics have tackled the concrete techniques of characterization in the play, which accordingly help manifest the playwright’s main thematic message. Hence, I would like to analyze Wilson’s unique poetics of characterization and point out his special contribution to the fashioning of contemporary American drama.

Wilson’s consistent guideline to mold his characters is blending. In other words, no characters are perfectly virtuous or heroic, and no characters are completely villainous.<sup>3</sup> He believes that every one has some positive and some negative character traits.<sup>4</sup> This imperfection or incompleteness allows us some space for change and improvement. Change hence goes hand in hand with his blending characterization.

#### **IV. Methodology (研究方法)**

M. H. Abrams defines characters as “the person represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as being endowed with particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their distinctive way of saying it—the dialogue—and from what they do—the action” (32-33). To characterize is to “establish the distinctive characters of a person” in a work (Abrams 33). To portray his characters convincingly, Wilson resorts to words, deeds, and incidents. We grasp the contours of a certain character through his/her speeches and action, as well as other characters’ comments on their words and deeds. Our perception of these characters sometimes also comes from the playwright’s stage direction or preface, but most important of all, it results from the events in the play. Wilson particularly employs the sophisticated plot incidents to fashion the African American characteristics of his characters. For the analysis of such characterization, I intend to use Michael Manheim’s concept of “vital contradictions” in his *Vital Contradictions: Characterization in the Plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov and O’Neill* to explore the contradiction and vitality of characterization.

William E. Gruber in *Missing Persons: Character and Characterization in Modern Drama* calls for the studies of character and characterization. Even though

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<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Aunt Ester who seems to be always instructing how black should steer the path of their life, most of Wilson’s protagonists are renowned for their human frailty. Even Bynum the wise bard is no exception since he too was once lost and after he is enlightened by his father, this healer is also in search of the shiny man to heal himself. Incidentally, Wilson does not have villains in his plays. Even characters who seem to be mean or evil have some positive function in the play. This technique of blending will be further discussed in the part of characterization of mixed values.

<sup>4</sup> Snodgrass mentions how Wilson learns a lesson from a wino when he was young, which inspires the image of the wise fool in his plays. This incident also demonstrates his early recognition of positive and negative things in one.

there occurs “a shift in criticism throughout the modern period from the studies of character to the studies of word” (Gruber 3), he still asserts, “the representation of character remains among the dramatist’s most important tasks” (1). Wilson also firmly believes that characterization integral to his drama and he does succeed in characterizing African Americans in his dramatic works. Countless characters delineated in his plays have certainly secured impressive positions in American literary arena, such as Ma Rainey, Troy Maxon, and Aunt Ester. His plays are very different from mainstream White traditional playwrights’ works because of their “complex themes and complex characters” (Bogumil 54). *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is no exception.

Critic Pereira asserts that this play is “the most complex play by Wilson” (105). It is the heavy themes such as history, displacement, diaspora, reconnection, self-empowerment intertwined in the play that render *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* dense, puzzling, provocative, and at the same time illuminating. When illustrating themes in his play, Wilson usually employs both the direct and the indirect ways.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, he also uses the direct and the indirect ways to present the dramatic functions and quintessence of his characters. For the direct way of characterization, I call it the characterization of metaphor, and the indirect way the characterization of mixed values. While Bynum Walker, Harold Loomis, and Bertha Holly are three examples of the metaphorical characterization, Rutherford Selig and Seth Holly exemplify the characterization of mixed values.

Both methods of characterization show the consistency of Wilson’s dramatic concept or philosophy of life—blending (or hybridizing) two bipolarized cultures. Even though he interrogates and rejects white God, his plays are rich in biblical allusions and Christian connotations. Even though he strongly propagates black African roots, he still foregrounds the inextricable fact of black new status as Americans in his plays.

When Michael Manheim studies modern drama, he is drawn to “vital contradiction” in modern classic plays. As Manheim argues, “Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and O’Neill all turned to emphasize characters [...] they emphasized the contradictory ways in which their people think and behave particularly in stressful situations” (15). I agree that “these inconsistencies add to their convincing qualities” (Manheim 15); however, while Manheim underscores “powerful, contradictory forces within them” (16), I detect in the blending/hybridizing ways of Wilson’s characterization contradictory powers not from within but without. Therefore, unlike Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, Chekhov’s *Lopakhin*, and O’Neill’s

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<sup>5</sup> Wilson sometimes speaks about the most important message to the spectator directly through his characters, but he also dares upon his spectators indirectly through the deeds those characters do or the lesson they learn at the end of the play.

James Tyron, Wilson's characters incorporate two distinctively different connotations. More often than not, the force that contradicts is not the character's own personality trait, but a codified significance. But, like Manheim's conclusion for his "inconsistent" characters, "vital human beings are most forcefully identified by their contradictions" (16).

## II. Discussion and Results (討論與結果)

### Characterization of Metaphor

Among the three major characters, Bynum's characterization tends to be the most simple and clear due to his role as the wise bard. By comparison, the characterization of Harold Loomis tends to be more progressive and provocative. In comparison with the two shining male protagonists, the minor character Bertha Seth seems mild in her characterization; nevertheless, she embodies the main message pivotal to the problems these blacks face.

### Bynum Walker

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* teaches African Americans to embrace their African identity, so it is easy to view Bynum Walker to be a conjure man who binds together people of dispersal due to firstly their forced migration from Africa to America three hundred years ago and secondly the Big Migration from American South to American North after the emancipation. Indicated by his name "Bynum," he binds people together. To critic Hay, Bynum is a "one-man chorus" (95). For the playwright and director Harrison, Bynum personifies "the community of the living and the dead" and he also signifies "the spiritual imperatives of the community's moral universe" (Hay 95). Wilson presents this iconic character to us lucidly through three methods: first, his binding people; second, his searching for the shiny man; and third, his signifying the hybridization of African-Christian living.

Bynum performs ritual cleansing, guides people to sing their song of self-recognition, seeks the shiny man to heal himself and others, and hybridizes African and Christian values of life. He has to be read metaphorically so that we can comprehend that between the bipolarized African and Christian forces in the play, there is a peaceful and mutually beneficiary hybridization of living.

### Herald Loomis

Critics regard Bynum and Loomis the central characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (Woolfe 81; Bogumil 55?). Some directly name Loomis "the primary protagonist" (Richards 96). Like Bynum's name which denotes his mission directly, critics also detect the significance of the name "Harold Loomis" as it suggests a messenger to enlighten people (Bogumi 68; Richards 96; Woolfe 80). However, Loomis is a lost soul in this play, waiting to be enlightened. Because of his



traumatizing past to be imprisoned by Joe Turner and his mental state of feeling lost, Loomis serves as a black Everyman. Thus, his metaphorical characterization is more direct and “didactic” than Bynum’s. Even though it seems obvious that the most important task for Loomis in the play is to find Martha Loomis/Pentacost, Wilson in fact mainly uses two methods to convey the metaphorical characterization of Loomis: first, exorcizing Joe Turner and second, rejecting Christian salvation.

In comparison with the hybridizing characterization of Bynum, the characterization of Loomis seems to be more centered on African consciousness. Most critics also liken Loomis’s vision and self-laceration to Wilson’s persistent call—remembrance; blacks must remember their African past. However, critic Richards cautions us not to be deluded by such simplistic way to read Loomis’s urgent call of reconnecting oneself to Africa at the expense of the rejection of Christianity. She explains “religion is blended” (Richards 97) and diaspora to Africans has been “normal and natural” (97). Wilson himself never aims at one culture; instead, he prefers “cultural braidedness” (Richards 93). This helps us see why this play is filled with African-inflected Christian beliefs and ways of living; moreover, it also conforms to the consistent Style of Wilson—hybridization or blending.

### **Bertha Holly**

Different from major characters of metaphor, Bertha’s metaphor is no less shining than the two men because she best embodies Wilson’s conception of African American way of living. Like Loomis’s characterization, Wilson uses deeds and words to characterize Bertha; while her positive words like encouraging Mattie to have “love and laughter,” render her a wise councilor like Bynum, her magnanimous deeds make her the most loving character in the play. Moreover, her African-Christian way of living reinforces the metaphorical characterization of Bynum.

### **The Mixed-valued Characterization of the Minor Characters**

While the metaphorical reading of the major characters may bring forth the solution to the confused African Americans’ identity problems, the mixed-valued characterization of the minor characters indeed consolidates the play’s insightful thematic message. However, most of the critics tend to have negative readings of Rutherford Selig and Seth Holly. They regard Selig, the white people finder, a modern version of slaver and Seth a northern free black man brainwashed by white’s racism. However, these two characters, one “a white devil” and the other “a black devil,” do offer positive contribution to African American’s self-empowerment in the play.

### **Rutherford Selig**

It is easy to understand why Selig is disliked or devalued because he is not only the only white character in the play but he also evokes the image of slaver since he mentions that his great grandfather’s job was a slaver, and his father used to be a slave

hunter in search of run-away slaves for white southern plantation owners. But at the end of the play he does accomplish his mission to find Martha and thus helps Loomis “stand up” again in the journey of life.

Hay even calls Selig a “healer” (98). From the characterization of this white people finder, Hay perceives a strong message from Wilson for African Americans. He sees forgiveness in such a paradoxical characterization of a progeny of slave trader. He states, “Regardless of how despicable past sins might be, forgiveness, like recovery, was but a word away” (98). Accordingly, the mixed-valued characterization of Selig attests to the fact that “gaining worth and self-sufficiency required black to forgive past racist transgression and form workable alliances” (Hay 98).

### **Seth Holly**

Like Selig, whose image is consist of the mean white exploiter and the blacks’ ally, the characterization of Seth is also mixed. On the one hand, he represents the snobbish northern free black who seems to have forgotten his African identity; on the other hand, he is also black’s role model because of his independence, autonomy, diligence, and craftsmanship. Seth is portrayed as self-absorbent, overbearing and haughty when he deals with blacks from the South particularly; nevertheless, beneath this mean portrayal, Wilson endows him with very positive characterization.

In addition to his factory job, Seth not only runs the boarding house with efficiency and success, makes a lucrative business out of this tinsmith skill, but he is also planning to open up the tin manufacturing business himself. When dealing with Selig, he proves to be a better businessman than him for he is quick and sharp. This enterprising spirit further indicates how confident he feels about himself. The best work ethics is epitomized in his remark, “All you got to do is want to do it” (43). The assertiveness on this self-centered, overbearing, and arrogant Seth again conforms to Wilson’s preference over complicated characterization.

### **VI. Conclusion (結論)**

Wilson dislikes arbitrary binary opposition and this distaste can be found both in the theme and the characterization in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. But he also stresses flexibility and embraces the blending way of life to incorporate both African and American cultures. This blending is also his characteristic in characterizing people in the play. Mixing seemingly “contradictory” perspectives together, he presents his characters in a vital and vivid way. Through the metaphorical characterization of Bynum, Loomis, and Bertha, Wilson asserts the importance of their African identity. Bet even the wise sage Bynum in search of his shiny man clearly manifests his metaphorical characterization through the combined image of John the Baptist, St. Paul and the African conjure man. The similar African Christian aura can be found in the characterization of Loomis because even if he rejects

Christian salvation and reconnects himself with African roots, his vision of the bones people and his self-laceration are very Christian. The characterization of Bertha further reconfirms Wilson's strategy of blending since Bertha incorporates African and Christian ways of living in her life. Her kind thoughts, words, and deeds evidence the harmony of such blending ways of life.

Furthermore, Wilson also renovates poetics of characterization by allowing minor characters to offer meaningful lessons or remarks of edification. Minor characters like Selig and Seth are convincingly sparkling because of their mixed-valued characterization. (Hay points out that Jeremy also has dual character portray: on the one hand, he looks "foolish and backward"; on the other hand, he is "principled and intelligent" (in Bigsby 98).) Although both characters seem to incur harsh criticisms at the first glance, under scrutiny, one finds the tremendously profound significance imbedded in their characterization. While the characterization of the white devil imparts forgiveness and coalition, the characterization of the black devil reminds blacks to emulate Seth's agency and hard work. A more constructive perspective evolves from their negative profiles. In sum, Wilson's special blending way to characterize has indeed diversified and enriched the different arrays of American dramatic literature.

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技轉： 已技轉  洽談中  無

其他：（以 100 字為限）

3. 請依學術成就、技術創新、社會影響等方面，評估研究成果之學術或應用價值（簡要敘述成果所代表之意義、價值、影響或進一步發展之可能性）500字為限）

本成果代表意義、價值及影響

本計畫深入細讀威爾森《喬透納來了又去了》中的非裔美人離散議題，討論美國人在二十一世紀應如何觀看非裔美人被迫離開非洲至美國四百年來白散歷史，及二十世紀初的由美國南方到北方的大遷移。在連結1600年代（非洲被迫遷至美洲）、1910年代（本戲描述歷史年代）、1980年代（本戲成年代）、2010年代（本計畫閱讀年代）的歷史意義方面是深具社會影響的。

威爾森的角色塑造手法是非常獨特的，與傳統亞里斯多德派秉承的性格統一貫性非常不同。本計畫雖採用梅海的矛盾角色塑造理論來解析威爾森劇中人物，但威爾森的人物豐富又複雜，本計畫的一大價值及貢獻即指出威爾森異於西方傳統的角色塑造詩學。例如，其一大特色即劇中重要待人處世常常是由次要角色不經意的點出，這與威爾森對非裔美國人的期許息息相關。

本計畫進一步發展之可能性

本計畫對少數族裔的研究十分重要，因此本人計畫投稿 African American Studies 期刊，但因為非裔美國人及威爾森對少數族裔的辛酸歷史及遠大期許不但對美國族群融合有莫大貢獻，對世界其他地區，例如也有族群融合議題的台灣也有啟發效益，因此本人亦計畫將此研究綜合以前所作威爾森研究做中文期刊投稿，盼能將威爾森戲劇中的睿智及原創引進台灣學術界，助台灣原住民及新住民發現自己的潛能。

# 國科會補助專題研究計畫項下出席國際學術會議心得報告

## 得報告

日期：99年8月18日

計畫編號	NSC 98-2410-H-004-170		
計畫名稱	威爾森《喬透那來了又去了》的角色塑造詩學		
出國人員姓名	姜翠芬	服務機構及職稱	政大英文系
會議時間	99年5月24日至 99年5月27日	會議地點	Toronto, Canada
會議名稱	(中文)美國加拿大學術研討會 (英文) American Canadian Conference for Academic Disciplines		
發表論文題目	(中文)威爾森《喬透那來了又去了》的角色塑造詩學 (英文) Poetics of Characterization in Wilson's <i>Joe Turner's Come and Gone</i>		



### 一、參加會議經過

該會議在 Toronto 的 Ryerson University 舉行，本人參加 5 月 26 日 13:00-14:55 名為”Literature and the Arts”的場次。

### 二、與會心得

本人發表的場次有六位論文發表人，包括多倫多的學者講阿裔北美文學、伊朗學者談西方電影在翻譯成在地語言時的意識形態操作與限制、吉達學者講艾略特對現代阿拉伯文學影響、加拿大學者談 Chaikin 作品中的女同志議題、以及本人談非裔美國戲劇。聆聽各國學者談論各種不同文化和文學表現及相關討論是本次與會的最大收穫。

### 三、考察參觀活動(無是項活動者略)

本次會議在五月二十五日由主辦單位帶領去參觀尼加拉瀑布，非常壯觀。

### 四、建議

無。

### 五、攜回資料名稱及內容

本次會議十分環保，都是採用朗讀論文及使用 ppt，大會並無紙本論文集。本人帶回 “Certificate of Merit” 證明參加此會。

### 六、其他

無。

## Poetics of Characterization in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

### 1. Introduction

African American playwright August Wilson's (1945-2005) project to write/right African American history via drama has won him resounding fame.<sup>1</sup> He not only demonstrates dedication and perseverance of African Americans in his plays, but he also develops highly unique characterization in his drama. Different from Aristotelian characterization or other American playwrights' characterization, Wilson in his *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) molds his characters in multilayer textures.

Set in Pittsburgh in 1911, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* centers on a boarding house owned by Bertha and Seth Holly. Just a few decades after the emancipation, many southern blacks come to the North in search of a better life. Among these wandering blacks who stay at Seth's boarding house are Herald Loomis and his eleven-year-old daughter Zonia in search of his estranged wife Martha, a conjure man Bynum Walker, who helps bind people together, a day laborer Jeremy Furlow, a young woman Mattie Campbell in search of her man, and another young woman Molly Cunningham. Loomis also pays one dollar to Rutherford Selig, the people finder, to find his wife. Selig is a rare white character in Wilson's plays, traveling North and South selling dustpans made by Seth. The play depicts the life of these roomers through the dialogues in Bertha's kitchen and dining room. At the end of the play, the people finder Selig does accomplish the mission by bringing Martha back to the boarding house to meet Loomis and Zonia.

Though a high school drop-out, Wilson was a very hardworking self-taught playwright,<sup>2</sup> tremendously influenced by great western dramatists such as Shakespeare and other masters. Wilson's plays therefore are very much in line with Aristotelian realistic characterization; however, Wilson is definitely adept in creating characters who are authentically real to that particular decade (for example, the 1910s in the case of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*) and significantly revealing to spectators now.

In addition to traditional characterization, Wilson has two extraordinary ways of characterization: characterization of metaphor and characterization of mixed values. The former, more applied to the main characters such as Herald Loomis and Bynum Walker and a minor character—Bertha Holly, tend to be connected to the thematic issues; hence, the meaning of their metaphorical characterization may be grasped directly. The latter, mainly employed for minor characters such as Seth Holly and

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<sup>1</sup> For the critical acclaim and the canonical recognition Wilson secured in American drama, please see Wolfe's *August Wilson*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> For the life of August and Wilson and more detail about his drop-out, see Snodgrass's *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*. Pp. 7-8.

Rutherford Selig, help elucidate the main message in the play. However, because of their mixed values or ostensibly negative character qualities, spectators may not comprehend the significance of this kind of mixed-valued characterization right away. Wilson's play is also teemed with three other minor characters Jeremy Furlow, Mattie Campbel, and Molly Cunningham, and two children characters, Reuben and Zonia, but these characters tend to be less significant for their loss of self or young age. This paper, therefore, intends to explore the metaphorical characterization of the main characters and the multifarious characterization of the minor or even "villainous" characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. These two kinds of characterization are uniquely Wilsonian, and African American par excellence.

After the play has been written in 1988, most critics have paid more attention to the thematic issues in the play. For example, because of "the spiritual insights," Harold Bloom regards *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as August Wilson's "strongest" play (Bloom n.p.). While critic Bogumil thinks the theme of this play is displacement (52), Morales stresses "establishing kinship" (112). Comparatively speaking, few critics have tackled the concrete techniques of characterization in the play, which accordingly help manifest the playwright's main thematic message. Hence, I would like to analyze Wilson's unique poetics of characterization and point out his special contribution to the fashioning of contemporary American drama.

Wilson's consistent guideline to mold his characters is blending. In other words, no characters are perfectly virtuous or heroic, and no characters are completely villainous.<sup>3</sup> He believes that every one has some positive and some negative character traits.<sup>4</sup> This imperfection or incompleteness allows us some space for change and improvement. Change hence goes hand in hand with his blending characterization.

M. H. Abrams defines characters as "the person represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as being endowed with particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their distinctive way of saying it—the dialogue—and from what they do—the action" (32-33). To characterize is to "establish the distinctive characters of a person" in a work (Abrams 33). To portray his characters convincingly, Wilson resorts to words, deeds, and incidents. We grasp the contours of a certain character through his/her speeches and action, as well as other characters' comments on their words and

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<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Aunt Ester who seems to be always instructing how black should steer the path of their life, most of Wilson's protagonists are renowned for their human frailty. Even Bynum the wise bard is no exception since he too was once lost and after he is enlightened by his father, this healer is also in search of the shiny man to heal himself. Incidentally, Wilson does not have villains in his plays. Even characters who seem to be mean or evil have some positive function in the play. This technique of blending will be further discussed in the part of characterization of mixed values.

<sup>4</sup> Snodgrass mentions how Wilson learns a lesson from a wino when he was young, which inspires the image of the wise fool in his plays. This incident also demonstrates his early recognition of positive and negative things in one.

deeds. Our perception of these characters sometimes also comes from the playwright's stage direction or preface, but most important of all, it results from the events in the play. Wilson particularly employs the sophisticated plot incidents to fashion the African American characteristics of his characters. For the analysis of such characterization, I intend to use Michael Manheim's concept of "vital contradictions" in his *Vital Contradictions: Characterization in the Plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov and O'Neill* to explore the contradiction and vitality of characterization.

William E. Gruber in *Missing Persons: Character and Characterization in Modern Drama* calls for the studies of character and characterization. Even though there occurs "a shift in criticism throughout the modern period from the studies of character to the studies of word" (Gruber 3), he still asserts, "the representation of character remains among the dramatist's most important tasks" (1). Wilson also firmly believes that characterization integral to his drama and he does succeed in characterizing African Americans in his dramatic works. Countless characters delineated in his plays have certainly secured impressive positions in American literary arena, such as Ma Rainey, Troy Maxon, and Aunt Ester. His plays are very different from mainstream White traditional playwrights' works because of their "complex themes and complex characters" (Bogumil 54). *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is no exception.

Critic Pereira asserts that this play is "the most complex play by Wilson" (105). It is the heavy themes such as history, displacement, diaspora, reconnection, self-empowerment intertwined in the play that render *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* dense, puzzling, provocative, and at the same time illuminating. When illustrating themes in his play, Wilson usually employs both the direct and the indirect ways.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, he also uses the direct and the indirect ways to present the dramatic functions and quintessence of his characters. For the direct way of characterization, I call it the characterization of metaphor, and the indirect way the characterization of mixed values. While Bynum Walker, Harold Loomis, and Bertha Holly are three examples of the metaphorical characterization, Rutherford Selig and Seth Holly exemplify the characterization of mixed values.

Both methods of characterization show the consistency of Wilson's dramatic concept or philosophy of life—blending (or hybridizing) two bipolarized cultures. Even though he interrogates and rejects white God, his plays are rich in biblical allusions and Christian connotations. Even though he strongly propagates blacks African roots, he still foregrounds the inextricable fact of blacks new status as Americans in his plays.

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<sup>5</sup> Wilson sometimes speaks about the most important message to the spectator directly through his characters, but he also dauns upon his spectators indirectly through the deeds those characters do or the lesson they learn at the end of the play.

When Michael Manheim studies modern drama, he is drawn to “vital contradiction” in modern classic plays. As Manheim argues, “Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and O’Neill all turned to emphasize characters [...] they emphasized the contradictory ways in which their people think and behave particularly in stressful situations” (15). I agree that “these inconsistencies add to their convincing qualities” (Manheim 15); however, while Manheim underscores “powerful, contradictory forces within them” (16), I detect in the blending/hybridizing ways of Wilson’s characterization contradictory powers not from within but without. Therefore, unlike Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, Chekhov’s *Lopakhin*, and O’Neill’s *James Tyron*, Wilson’s characters incorporate two distinctively different connotations. More often than not, the force that contradicts is not the character’s own personality trait, but a codified significance. But, like Manheim’s conclusion for his “inconsistent” characters, “vital human beings are most forcefully identified by their contradictions” (16).

## **2. Characterization of Metaphor**

Among the three major characters, Bynum’s characterization tends to be the most simple and clear due to his role as the wise bard. By comparison, the characterization of Harold Loomis tends to be more progressive and provocative. In comparison with the two shining male protagonists, the minor character Bertha Seth seems mild in her characterization; nevertheless, she embodies the main message pivotal to the problems these blacks face.

### **2.1 Bynum Walker**

*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* teaches African Americans to embrace their African identity, so it is easy to view Bynum Walker to be a conjure man who binds together people of dispersal due to firstly their forced migration from Africa to America three hundred years ago and secondly the Big Migration from American South to American North after the emancipation. Indicated by his name “Bynum,” he binds people together. To critic Hay, Bynum is a “one-man chorus” (95). For the playwright and director Harrison, Bynum personifies “the community of the living and the dead” and he also signifies “the spiritual imperatives of the community’s moral universe” (Hay 95). Wilson presents this iconic character to us lucidly through three methods: first, his binding people; second, his searching for the shiny man; and third, his signifying the hybridization of African-Christian living.

#### **2.1.1 Binding People**

Bynum binds people together by performing rituals and offering wise councils to the lost souls. In the stage directions Wilson tells us Bynum “gives the impression of always being in control of everything. Nothing even bothers him. He seems to be

lost in a world of his own making and to swallow any adversity or interference with his grand design.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Bynum seems to appear as an omniscient conjure man. Although he does not conduct rituals on stage, the spectators are informed of his rituals reported by first Seth and later the neighbor boy Reuben Mercer. He is then characterized as a “priest” (Richards 92), a “diviner”(?). The only thing he performs on stage is the juba dance.

This “perfectly sane African healer” (Shannon 135) offers sagacious tips to people so as to enlighten people or bind them together. To Jeremy, Mattie, and Loomis, he gives out worthwhile advice. When Bertha dissuades Jeremy from going to Seefus because of the danger of being imprisoned again, Bynum disagrees by saying, “Some things is worth taking the chance going to jail about”(18). When Mattie pays him to get her man Jack Carper back, Bynum frankly instructs her, “Somebody else done get a powerful hand in it and ain’t nothing to be done to break it. You got to let him go find where he’s supposed to be in the world” (23). When Loomis tells him not to sing the song, “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,” Bynum prescribes to him,

Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forget his song. Forget how to sing it. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is. [...] I can tell you one of Joe Turner’s niggers. ‘Cause you forget how to sing your song. (71)

To those who are lost, Bynum enlightens them, so Jeremy can plunge into the unknown world to do what he likes, and Mattie can forget the man who does not fit her and can run after the man whom she may rely on at the end of the play. As pointed out by Elam, Bynum also helps Selig find Loomis’s wife by giving him very useful road guidance to Ranken (190-91), and thus Bynum “binds” Loomis and Martha together. More importantly, it is also Bynum who helps set Loomis free. When Loomis protests, “All the time it was you that bind me up! You bound me to the road,” Bynum clearly answers, “I ain’t bind you, Herold Loomis. You can’t bind what don’t cling” (91). Seeing Loomis pulling out a knife, he furthers teaches him, “You binding yourself. You bound onto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it... Then you be free” (91). Later, Loomis does succeed in standing up and singing his song. In sum, Bynum is indeed the wise bard in guiding people.

### **2.1.2 Searching for the Shiny Man**

That Bynum is a bard, a healer is clearly represented through his ritual and advice; however, the wise bard himself is also looking for the shiny man to obtain

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<sup>6</sup> August Wilson, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1988). Subsequent references to the play are parenthetically noted.

some reconfirmation. This act to find the shiny man is the second method Wilson uses to characterize Bynum. It is a very significant strategy of Wilson's to characterize or even to thematize; that is, no one is perfect, not even the wisest character. Therefore, even if Bynum has learned the most important message from his father to heal people, even if he has been given the crucial vision, a vision described by him as "something I ain't got words to tell you" (10), he is still in search of the shiny man. At the end of the play when Loomis is able to stand up to break away from his past, Bynum then finds his shiny man—Loomis, who is "shining like new money" (94). As Wolfe has pointed out, "The healer is healed by someone whose inner split he helped heal" (85). Some critics have noticed this legacy for the healer to pass this precious teaching to the next; hence, the search of the shiny man can be perpetuated on and on. For example, Brewer asserts Bynum's experience "prefigures Loomis's later self-laceration" (11). While Pereira regards Bynum as a "catalyst" (66), Keller calls him a "precursor" as opposed to Loomis, the true African subject (478). Bynum's search for the shiny man is consequently a uniquely Wilsonian characterization.

### **2.1.3 Signifying the Hybridization of African-Christian Living**

The third way to characterize Bynum is also quite Wilsonian is his hybridization of African-Christian living. It is doubtless to say that between African and White Christian value, Wilson tends to convince his fellow blacks to identify more with their black roots. This is because Blacks have been physically and spiritually dominated by whites for too long that they have forgotten who they really are. At an interview in 1991, Wilson clearly explained that the one simple fact for the people in the play is that "they are African people" (Bigsby 211). Nevertheless, what is dramatized in the play is definitely an inextricable combination of African and Christian beliefs, cultures, and ways of living. *Joe Turner's come and Gone* smacks of African mythology as critics like Pereira (65), Harrison, and Keller (474) have pointed out. However, the play is at the same time imbued with biblical allusions as suggested by Harris, Pereira (66, 71), Keller (474), Hay (95), and Richards (92). Blacks cannot be too assimilated or Christian that they forget they are black. Nor can they become completely separated from the white, Christian, Eurocentric culture. But they can hybridize the two and keep the flexibility. Hence, Bynum in his vision can see the similar vision Loomis later sees in his trance—the rebirth of their bones people (their African ancestors), and, meanwhile, he can be given the job by his father to be and to seek "the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way" (John the Baptist) (10). Just like African American English that retains the form of white English with African autonomy, Bynum's African Christian way of living also allows the two cultures to co-exist peacefully.

Bynum performs ritual cleansing, guides people to sing their song of



self-recognition, seeks the shiny man to heal himself and others, and hybridizes African and Christian values of life. He has to be read metaphorically so that we can comprehend that between the bipolarized African and Christian forces in the play, there is a peaceful and mutually beneficiary hybridization of living.

## **2.2 Herald Loomis**

Critics regard Bynum and Loomis the central characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (Woolfe 81; Bogumil 55?). Some directly name Loomis “the primary protagonist” (Richards 96). Like Bynum’s name which denotes his mission directly, critics also detect the significance of the name “Harold Loomis” as it suggests a messenger to enlighten people (Bogumi 68; Richards 96; Woolfe 80). However, Loomis is a lost soul in this play, waiting to be enlightened. Because of his traumatizing past to be imprisoned by Joe Turner and his mental state of feeling lost, Loomis serves as a black Everyman. Thus, his metaphorical characterization is more direct and “didactic” than Bynum’s. Even though it seems obvious that the most important task for Loomis in the play is to find Martha Loomis/Pentacost, Wilson in fact mainly uses two methods to convey the metaphorical characterization of Loomis: first, exorcizing Joe Turner and second, rejecting Christian salvation.

With Bynum’s guidance and assistance, Herald Loomis, the Everyman in the African American context, has to find his song/self for self-recognition. Once imprisoned by Joe Turner to do forced labor for seven years, Loomis has lost all the anchorage in life even after he has been released, because he has internalized the white man’s ideology to think himself (the black) worthless. The only meaningful thing in his life now is to find his wife Martha.

Wilson uses two incidents in the play to gear a lost soul like Loomis back to the right track and to enlighten the spectators: first, Loomis’s trance invoked by the Juba dance and second, Loomis’s self-redemption after rejecting Martha’s Christian salvation. Both incidents are uniquely Wilsonian in style because Wilson has been preoccupied by African and Christian religions.

### **2.2.1 Exorcizing Joe Turner**

Even though Seth might be too judgmental and biased in disliking Loomis, he is right to say, “Something ain’t seeming right with that fellow” (19). This “something” is the traumatic effect caused by Joe Turner’s enforced labor on Loomis for seven years, which results in concomitant disasters: his wife’s desertion of him, his loss of self-confidence, and his alienation from people and society.

As the title of the play indicates, “Joe Turner” must be a crucial term for the understanding of the play. Indeed, “Joe Turner” refers to two levels of meanings: the literal/historical Joe Turner and the figurative white slaver. Critics have discussed the historical Joe Turner to authenticate the misery and suffering of blacks like Loomis

(Elam 10-11). Hearing Bynum singing “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,” Loomis expresses his displeasure and relates how he was captured by Joe Turner:

I was walking down this road in this little town outside of Memphis. [...] I stopped to preach to these fellows [...] 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. (72)

As critics have pointed out, Joe Turner’s deed brings fragmentation and disintegration (Shanon 124; Woolfe 76). Even when Loomis is set free, he is so haunted by this unbearable past that he not only loses all the sense of life but also appears to be “possessed.” (He has this wild look in his eyes that both Seth and Reuben think him menacing (Bogumi 89).) (He forgets how to touch a woman and also becomes “the social outcast” (Shannon 131).)

The figurative meaning of Joe Turner refers to the deplorable history those African ancestors experienced three hundred years ago when they were captured and then shipped to America to be slaves. Therefore, Joe Turner’s capturing and enslaving of Herald Loomis can be read as the white men capturing and enslaving Africans. In other words, Loomis’s overwhelming sense of loss should be read metaphorically as blacks’ strong degradation of abduction and bondage. Joe Turner’s unjust treatment to Loomis parallels whites’ unjust treatment to blacks. To reorient himself, Loomis must exorcise Joe Turner’s spell on him; because that Loomis’s life equals the entire black experience (Pereira 81), to re-orient themselves, blacks have to overcome the wrong self-image and ideology internalized by whites.

### **2.2.2 Rejecting Christian Salvation**

To exorcise his miserable past afflicted by Joe Turner, Loomis has to break through the past and to reject Christian salvation. Wilson then makes the metaphorical characterization of Loomis complete by giving him two chances to reject Christian guidance. One is the vision he sees after the juba dance, and the other happens at the end of the play when Martha offers him Christian salvation.

Shannon has pointed out that Loomis is “the most enigmatic character” in the play (130). His enigma principally comes from Wilson’s characterization of blending anti-Christian message and Christian ways of representation, which corresponds to Wilson’s consistent style of bending two bipolar elements together. Therefore, the two episodes when Loomis rejects Christianity are in fact very much like a Christian play. First, he interrupts the boarding house members’ juba, and conversely becomes possessed and sees a vision, uttering, “Herald Loomis done seen some things he ain’t got words to tell you” (53). In the vision, he sees that the bones people (his African

ancestors) walk across the water, get washed into the water, come out of the water with flesh, receive breath of the wind, shake hands with each other and walk each other's way. The vision of the bones people obviously brings forth the image of Africans particularly because the same image recurs in Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* in which the sailing of the Africans in the Middle Passage is enacted. Hence, Loomis is shocked into remembrance by the juba dance (Richards 97). Most critics easily link this vision Loomis sees to Wilson's emphasis on remembering blacks' African roots (Shanon 126; Richards 93; Elam 3, 9; Keller 475). Pereira even asserts that after Loomis's trance in his vision, the Holy Ghost evoked is ousted by African subconscious past (73), which clearly refers to "the old African tradition and an emerging African American identity" (74).

The second time Loomis rejects Christianity is manifestly presented when Martha tries to calm down mad Loomis by reciting Psalm 23 and persuades him that "Jesus offers [him] salvation" (93). Rejecting Martha's/Christianity's way to be cleansed with the blood of the lamb, Loomis "slashes himself across the chest. He rubs the blood over his face and comes to a realization" (93). By rejecting Christian salvation, Loomis is able to finally break away from his traumatizing and paralyzing past.

Loomis rejects Christian redemption in his vision of the bones people and in his cleansing himself using his own blood. Nevertheless, both incidents remind one of Christianity in that they are still connected to Christian baptism, resurrection, and sacrificial eucharis. In the vision, the bones people are baptized from the water and then resurrected, and in slashing himself and cleansing himself with his own blood, Loomis is repeating Christ's way of self-sacrifice and redemption. This simultaneous rejection and appropriation is the vital blending in Wilson's characterization.

In comparison with the hybridizing characterization of Bynum, the characterization of Loomis seems to be more centered on African consciousness. Most critics also liken Loomis's vision and self-laceration to Wilson's persistent call—remembrance; blacks must remember their African past. However, critic Richards cautions us not to be deluded by such simplistic way to read Loomis's urgent call of reconnecting oneself to Africa at the expense of the rejection of Christianity. She explains "religion is blended" (Richards 97) and diaspora to Africans has been "normal and natural" (97). Wilson himself never aims at one culture; instead, he prefers "cultural braidedness" (Richards 93). This helps us see why this play is filled with African-inflected Christian beliefs and ways of living; moreover, it also conforms the consistent Style of Wilson—hybridization or blending.

### **2.3 Bertha Holly**

Different from major characters of metaphor, Bertha's metaphor is no less

shining than the two men because she best embodies Wilson's conception of African American way of living. Like Loomis's characterization, Wilson uses deeds and words to characterize Bertha; while her positive words like encouraging Mattie to have "love and laughter," render her a wise councilor like Bynum, her magnanimous deeds make her the most loving character in the play. Moreover, her African-Christian way of living reinforces the metaphorical characterization of Bynum.

### **2.3.1 The Positive Words**

Although Bertha is a minor character, she is the spokeswoman for Wilson when she declares the elixir to suffering or traumatized African Americans—"love and laughter" (87). As Wilson's constant technique of characterization, an ordinary woman or an insignificant character like Bertha may also offer sagacity. Therefore, the significance of her positive words is twofold: the literal and the figurative. Literally, Bertha is counseling Mattie on how to help Loomis. Like Bynum offering advices to the last souls (Richards 99), Bertha has comforted Mattie and told her not to feel sad over Jeremy's desertion because "Jeremy ain't had enough to him for [her]"(75). After observing the parting scene between Loomis and Mattie, Bertha shares her experience with her and tells her what goes wrong with Loomis and how Mattie can do to help him, indirectly encouraging Mattie to go for this man she needs, that is, "a man who's got some understanding and who willing to work with that understanding to come to the best he can" (75). Bertha explicitly tells Mattie to simply give Loomis love and laughter.

Figuratively, Wilson, through this motherly figure's mouth, teaches African Americans or us how to face life, especially in hard times. Only through love and laughter can one cope with life. Bertha further explains, "That's all anybody needs. To have love in one hand and laughter in the other" (87). All the characters in the play, except Bertha, are looking for somebody or something; in other words, they are looking for love. Love solidifies our existence and gives strength to our life. However, just like what Bertha has pointed out to Mattie, "But life ain't no happy-go-lucky where everything be just like you want it!" (75). Therefore, we need laughter to help us and to heal us. Thus, Wilson enlightens us to have "The kind of laugh that comes from way deep inside"(87) through Bertha.

To just stand and laugh and let life flow right through you. Just laugh to let yourself know you're alive. (87)

Bertha looks at life from a very healthy perspective. It is this positive philosophy of life Wilson would like to impart to his spectators through Bertha's characterization.

Because of such positive attitudes, Bertha always looks at people from a more

considerate and hopeful perspective. Contrary to her husband Seth's suspicion and cynicism, Bertha shows trust and confidence in Loomis. Several times when Seth mentions the bad thing Loomis seems likely to do, it is Bertha who speaks for Loomis with sense and confidence (33; 87). She utters positive words, and she certainly knows the power of positive words.

### **2.3.2 The Magnanimous Deeds**

Although Bertha has no children, she undoubtedly is the "mother figure" (Pereira 70) who takes care of all the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Without much nagging, she plays the role of Seth's wife appropriately. Wilson notes in the stage direction, "Married for over twenty-five years, she has learned how to negotiate around Seth's apparent orneriness" (1). From the way she interacts with Seth and from what she says to comfort Mattie, it is not hard to find that Bertha respects her husband and takes him into consideration all the time. Shanon asserts, "Bertha best exemplifies marital harmony" (141). Like loving her child, Bertha has high wisdom in taking care of her pampered husband.

Extending her motherly love, Bertha is the nurturer to all other people. She feeds the roomers dutifully; she indeed carries out her belief in love well. Whenever she appears she is always preparing or cleaning up breakfast or dinner. (Seven out of the nine scenes in the play, she is feeding them.) Most impressive of all, she excels in fried chicken (50). She offers her care to her husband's long-term business friend, Selig, with biscuits and hospitality. When Seth is cold and rigid to Loomis and Zonia, she warms them up by "taking Zonia under her wing, directing Loomis to another boarding house" (Pereira 69). She is "the symbolic matriarch" (Shanon 141). Her magnanimous deeds reflect the characterization of love.

### **2.3.3 The African Christian Way of Living**

Many critics have pointed out the amazing blend of African and Christian elements in Bertha's religious belief and way of living (Pereira 71; Bogumi 167; Woolfe 88). Judged from her responsible attitude and regular church going habit, Bertha is a devout Christian. However, she also has her "African" ways in blessing her house by sprinkling things around her house to bring blessings. Moreover, the laughter and the dance she performs are also reminiscent of "a lost African culture" (Pereira 71). When she convinces Mattie how important laughter is to life, "Bertha moves about the kitchen as though blessing it and chasing away the huge sadness that seems to envelop it" (87). Wilson describes "It is a dance and demonstration of her own magic, her own remedy that is centuries old and to which she is connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood's memory" (87). Wilson particularly would like to invoke from Bertha's dance some thing that has been there for centuries, which is what Pereira calls as the "folk dynamic in the historical development of

Afro-American Christianity” ( ), Wilson believes that some deeply-rooted perceptions and cultural habits have been preserved in black’ psyche. This “Africanness” as performed by Bertha’s dance indicates the simultaneous blending feature of such black Christian way of living.

### **3. The Mixed-valued Characterization of the Minor Characters**

While the metaphorical reading of the major characters may bring forth the solution to the confused African Americans’ identity problems, the mixed-valued characterization of the minor characters indeed consolidates the play’s insightful thematic message. However, most of the critics tend to have negative readings of Rutherford Selig and Seth Holly. They regard Selig, the white people finder, a modern version of slaver and Seth a northern free black man brainwashed by white’s racism. However, these two characters, one “a white devil” and the other “a black devil,” do offer positive contribution to African American’s self-empowerment in the play.

#### **3.1 Rutherford Selig**

It is easy to understand why Selig is disliked or devalued because he is not only the only white character in the play but he also evokes the image of slaver since he mentions that his great grandfather’s job was a slaver, and his father used to be a slave hunter in search of run-away slaves for white southern plantation owners. But at the end of the play he does accomplish his mission to find Martha and thus helps Loomis “stand up” again in the journey of life.

##### **3.1.1 A White Devil**

Because of his family and ethnic background, Rutherford Selig is an embodiment of old-time white slaver and present-time white economy exploiter. He himself boldly refers back to his ancestors’ atrocious behavior.

[...] we been finders in my family for a long time. Bringer and finders. My great-granddaddy used to bring Nigras across the ocean on ships [...] My daddy, [...], 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 across the country. (41)

Hay points out that Selig “shamelessly announces his family business” (83). This account of Selig directly conveys the cruelty and persecution the white slavers have brought upon blacks. It is no wonder that most critics would still have negative interpretations of the only white character in the play. Nadel thinks Selig “represents the institution and practices that have initially reduced black to the property” (99); Brewer connects Selig to “a racist economy” (10); Pereira takes Selig as the last in a long line of white pursuers, making a profit [...] in disguise of a benefactor” (59);

Hay sees in Selig's present profession the "manipulation of black lives and their dependence on his white privilege" (83). In sum, the critics consequently link Selig to "the mythic Joe Turner" (Nadel 99).

### **3.1.2 The First-Class People Finder**

Even though the characterization of Selig easily results in the image of a white devil, Selig's characterization still entails a positive significance, which corresponds to Wilson's views of the philosophy of life African Americans should embrace. Through the characterization of Selig, the concept of the harmonious and cooperative relation between whites and blacks is clearly announced.

The harmonious and cooperative relation is best exemplified through, first, the steady and prosperous business relation between Selig and Seth and, second, Selig's success in bringing back Martha Pentacost for Loomis. Selig, the door-to-door town-to-town traveling salesman, gives Seth metal sheets in exchange of dustpans for sale. Their business has brought reciprocal profits, so Selig keeps returning to visit Seth. He has also been warmly received by the Holly and Bynum as if he is part of the family. (Seth even bequeaths him with his home grown cabbage and tomatoes (11).)

Entrusted to find Loomis's wife, Selig at the end of the play succeeds in bringing Martha to Loomis at the boarding house. Although Loomis and Martha are not "bound" together, Selig helps bind Martha and her daughter together, and he also consequently gives Loomis a chance to break away from his past and to embrace himself (to find himself) and to reconnect. Even though, as Elam argues, it is actually Bynum who gives him the direction to go to Rankin so that he can smoothly find Martha (Elam), Selig is still the First-Class People Finder. With his service and Bynum's help, the separated family can then be united. Agreeing with Powers, critic Wolfe asserts, "[Selig] is not evil at all. In fact, he's performing a valuable service for the community" (89). The white people finder is now working with blacks.

Hay even calls Selig a "healer" (98). From the characterization of this white people finder, Hay perceives a strong message from Wilson for African Americans. He sees forgiveness in such a paradoxical characterization of a progeny of slave trader. He states, "Regardless of how despicable past sins might be, forgiveness, like recovery, was but a word away" (98). Accordingly, the mixed-valued characterization of Selig attests to the fact that "gaining worth and self-sufficiency required black to forgive past racist transgression and form workable alliances" (Hay 98).

### **3.2 Seth Holly**

Like Selig, whose image is consist of the mean white exploiter and the blacks' ally, the characterization of Seth is also mixed. On the one hand, he represents the snobbish northern free black who seems to have forgotten his African identity; on the other hand, he is also black's role model because of his independence, autonomy,

diligence, and craftsmanship. Seth is portrayed as self-absorbent, overbearing and haughty when he deals with blacks from the South particularly; nevertheless, beneath this mean portrayal, Wilson endows him with very positive characterization.

Seth is relentlessly attacked by some critics because this businessman who is said to be influenced by white capitalism acts unkindly to the protagonist Loomis and is stern on driving Loomis and Zonia out of his boarding house after Loomis's trance. He presents himself as a totally independent individual; although he looks pragmatic, Seth shows Loomis how African American can be truly free.

### **3.2.1 A Black Devil**

From the surface, Seth Holly seems to be the black devil in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* because of his mean treatment to others and his disrespect of his African roots. Even though all blacks at this special time space are all dominated by whites, there is class division among blacks (Zweigenhaft), and Seth is an example of the snobbish northern free black. Because of this strong sense of superiority, he tends to despise southern blacks like Jeremy, regarding them "country" (5), or to suspect others. With particular contempt and unfriendliness, Seth calls Loomis "wide-eyed mean-looking nigger" (37) and drives him out of his boarding house with determination. To fellow blacks, Seth has no pity (Pereira 57). His class-consciousness and overbearing individualism to some critic is "a form of evil" (Hay in Bigsby 97).

Several critics detect in Seth a sense of intentional alienation from anything African (Elkins 114; Kester; Shannon 135; Wolfe 86-87). Wolfe points out that the characterization of Seth reveals "a great deal of Western conditioning" (87). Therefore, he seems condescending to whatever Bynum is doing and calls his ritual mumbo-jumbo nonsense (?). He simply disavows any connection with the African continent (Shannon 135).

### **3.2.2 An Autonomous Black**

Despite the ostensible classist, suspicious, and assimilistic characteristics, Wilson characterizes Seth as the embodiment of black autonomy, through his independence, craftsmanship, and diligence. Among a plethora of characters, Seth is quite "different" (Wolfe 86; Pereira 57; Brewer 9). Hay regards Seth representing "the brunt of the ideas [...] black work ethics" (in Bigsby 97). Wolfe points out Seth has four jobs: the owner of a boarding house, a factory worker, a tinsmith, and a vegetable farmer (86). He is a sharp contrast to the wandering jobless blacks out in the street such as Jeremy and Loomis. "His Northern upbringing and sedentary lifestyle make him an anomaly among men in *Joe Turner*" (Brewer 9).

In addition to his factory job, Seth not only runs the boarding house with efficiency and success, makes a lucrative business out of this tinsmith skill, but he is



also planning to open up the tin manufacturing business himself. When dealing with Selig, he proves to be a better businessman than him for he is quick and sharp. This enterprising spirit further indicates how confident he feels about himself. The best work ethics is epitomized in his remark, “All you got to do is want to do it” (43). The assertiveness on this self-centered, overbearing, and arrogant Seth again conforms to Wilson’s preference over complicated characterization.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Wilson dislikes arbitrary binary opposition and this distaste can be found both in the theme and the characterization in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. But he also stresses flexibility and embraces the blending way of life to incorporate both African and American cultures. This blending is also his characteristic in characterizing people in the play. Mixing seemingly “contradictory” perspectives together, he presents his characters in a vital and vivid way. Through the metaphorical characterization of Bynum, Loomis, and Bertha, Wilson asserts the importance of their African identity. Even the wise sage Bynum in search of his shiny man clearly manifests his metaphorical characterization through the combined image of John the Baptist, St. Paul and the African conjure man. The similar African Christian aura can be found in the characterization of Loomis because even if he rejects Christian salvation and reconnects himself with African roots, his vision of the bones people and his self-laceration are very Christian. The characterization of Bertha further reconfirms Wilson’s strategy of blending since Bertha incorporates African and Christian ways of living in her life. Her kind thoughts, words, and deeds evidence the harmony of such blending ways of life.

Like the dispersal of the Middle Passage three hundred years ago, the Big Migration also results in another dispersal of American blacks. Only through reconnecting with their past can these African Americans acquire self-determination and self-fulfillment.

Furthermore, Wilson also renovates poetics of characterization by allowing minor characters to offer meaningful lessons or remarks of edification. Minor characters like Selig and Seth are convincingly sparkling because of their mixed-valued characterization. (Hay points out that Jeremy also has dual character portray: on the one hand, he looks “foolish and backward”; on the other hand, he is “principled and intelligent” (in Bigsby 98).) Although both characters seem to incur harsh criticisms at the first glance, under scrutiny, one finds the tremendously profound significance imbedded in their characterization. While the characterization of the white devil imparts forgiveness and coalition, the characterization of the black devil reminds blacks to emulate Seth’s agency and hard work. A more constructive

perspective evolves from their negative profiles. In sum, Wilson's special blending way to characterize has indeed diversified and enriched the different arrays of American dramatic literature.

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無研發成果推廣資料

98 年度專題研究計畫研究成果彙整表

計畫主持人：姜翠芬		計畫編號：98-2410-H-004-170-					
計畫名稱：威爾森《喬透那來了又去了》的角色塑造詩學							
成果項目		量化			單位	備註（質化說明：如數個計畫共同成果、成果列為該期刊之封面故事...等）	
		實際已達成數（被接受或已發表）	預期總達成數（含實際已達成數）	本計畫實際貢獻百分比			
國內	論文著作	期刊論文	0	0	100%	篇	
		研究報告/技術報告	0	0	100%		
		研討會論文	0	0	100%		
		專書	0	0	100%		
	專利	申請中件數	0	0	100%	件	
		已獲得件數	0	0	100%		
	技術移轉	件數	0	0	100%	件	
		權利金	0	0	100%	千元	
	參與計畫人力（本國籍）	碩士生	0	0	100%	人次	
		博士生	0	0	100%		
		博士後研究員	0	0	100%		
		專任助理	0	0	100%		
國外	論文著作	期刊論文	0	0	100%	篇	
		研究報告/技術報告	0	0	100%		
		研討會論文	1	1	100%		
		專書	0	0	100%	章/本	
	專利	申請中件數	0	0	100%	件	
		已獲得件數	0	0	100%		
	技術移轉	件數	0	0	100%	件	
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	參與計畫人力（外國籍）	碩士生	0	0	100%	人次	
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		博士後研究員	0	0	100%		
		專任助理	0	0	100%		

<p>其他成果 (無法以量化表達之成果如辦理學術活動、獲得獎項、重要國際合作、研究成果國際影響力及其他協助產業技術發展之具體效益事項等，請以文字敘述填列。)</p>	<p>無</p>
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	成果項目	量化	名稱或內容性質簡述
科 教 處 計 畫 加 填 項 目	測驗工具(含質性與量性)	0	
	課程/模組	0	
	電腦及網路系統或工具	0	
	教材	0	
	舉辦之活動/競賽	0	
	研討會/工作坊	0	
	電子報、網站	0	
	計畫成果推廣之參與(閱聽)人數	0	





# 國科會補助專題研究計畫成果報告自評表

請就研究內容與原計畫相符程度、達成預期目標情況、研究成果之學術或應用價值（簡要敘述成果所代表之意義、價值、影響或進一步發展之可能性）、是否適合在學術期刊發表或申請專利、主要發現或其他有關價值等，作一綜合評估。

1. 請就研究內容與原計畫相符程度、達成預期目標情況作一綜合評估

達成目標

未達成目標（請說明，以 100 字為限）

實驗失敗

因故實驗中斷

其他原因

說明：

2. 研究成果在學術期刊發表或申請專利等情形：

論文： 已發表  未發表之文稿  撰寫中  無

專利： 已獲得  申請中  無

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其他：（以 100 字為限）

3. 請依學術成就、技術創新、社會影響等方面，評估研究成果之學術或應用價值（簡要敘述成果所代表之意義、價值、影響或進一步發展之可能性）（以 500 字為限）

本計畫深入細讀威爾森《喬透納來了又去了》中的非裔美人離散議題，探討美國人在二十一世紀應如何觀看非裔美人被迫離開非洲至美國四百年來的離散歷史，及二十世紀初的由美國南方到北方的大遷移。在連結 1600 年代（由非洲被迫遷至美洲）、1910 年代（本戲描述歷史年代）、1980 年代（本戲寫成年代）、2010 年代（本計畫閱讀年代）的歷史意義方面是深具社會影響力的。威爾森的角色塑造手法是非常獨特的，與傳統亞里斯多德派秉承的性格統一貫性非常不同。本計畫雖採用梅海的矛盾角色塑造理論來解析威爾森劇中人物，但威爾森的人物豐富又複雜，本計畫的一大價值及貢獻即指出威爾森異於西方傳統的角色塑造詩學。本計畫對少數族裔的研究十分重要，因此本人計畫投稿 African American Studies 期刊，但因為非裔美國人及威爾森對少數族裔的辛酸歷史及遠大期許不但對美國族群融合有莫大貢獻，對世界其他地區，例如也有族群融合問題的台灣也有啟發效益，因此本人亦計畫將此研究綜合以前所作威爾森的研究做中文期刊投稿，盼能將威爾森戲劇中的睿智及原創引進台灣學術界，幫助台灣原住民及新住民發現自己的潛能。

