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Joe Turner's Come and Gone: A Male Perspective

In August Wilson's Joe Turner's Come and Gone the male characters in the play define their roles as men through their relationship with women or their work. These men are in search of ways to establish themselves in the northern United States. They are also trying to reassemble damaged self-images and protect existing ones. Each male character in the play describes for himself his expectation of what it is to be a man. In American society, being a man means achieving, accomplishing, having a good job, and providing adequately for oneself and one's family. Today men face the same challenges concerning their ability to fulfill their expectations of what it is to be a man.

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Men defend their roles as the breadwinner and provider by protecting and maintaining their jobs, jobs that provides financial support for their families. The protection of this job becomes important when a perceived threat to its existence is imagined. Men's goals become more and more wrapped up with their work, and they tend to identify themselves by stating their occupations. They address themselves as doctors, professors, farmers, or pot and pan makers. Some men who become established in their jobs develop a sense of superiority over those who are seeking employment and whose job holds a perceived lower social status. Men who are unemployed or employed

in jobs that are demeaning and do not provide enough to meet the basic living requirements are forced into the humiliating circumstance of proving their manhood while being denied access to the tools with which to do so. Historically women seeking mates expect potential mates to be gainfully employed. Generally they are seeking a stable provider, a man who can keep his job. Employment in American society is unavoidably interwoven with manhood. Because masculinity and manhood are tied to economic and occupational success, the relationships between men and women can be damaged when these expectations are not met.

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Seth is established in the North with a boardinghouse that he runs with his wife, Bertha. His father left it to him. Seth's occupation is making pots and pans; he learned the trade from his father. He practices by working nights for Mr. Olowske and in his spare time for Rutherford Selig, a peddler. Bynum is a 60 year old conjure man who has lived in Seth's boardinghouse for three years. Like Seth, Bynum learned his art from his father, an art that binds people together. Bynum is satisfied with his role in life, and he practices it every day. Herald Loomis is a new resident in Seth's boardinghouse. He came up from the South with his daughter searching for his wife after being enslaved for seven years by Joe Turner. Herald Loomis' self-image is that of a failed man, a man who has been denied access to the tools with which to provide for his family's welfare.

Men consider themselves to be most stable when they own property. Property gives them a foundation on which they can control and expand their self-image and self-esteem. Seth's self-image and self-esteem are tied into his ownership of a respectable boardinghouse. Seth defends his self-image when he controls the people who he considers a threat to the respectability of his boardinghouse. Seth believes Bynum and

Herald Loomis are examples of the “niggers coming up here with that old backward country style of living” (Act I Scene I). He feels that these people tarnish the reputation of his respectable boardinghouse and are a threat to one of his sources of income. He demonstrates his sense of superiority and control over Herald Loomis when he kicks him out of the boardinghouse.

Having a good job and being able to provide for one’s family is critical to a man’s self-esteem. Seth is proud of his ability to “make something out of nothing. He takes metal and bends and twists it whatever way he wants to make pots and pans” (Act II Scene I). He spends most of his time working and maintains his manly self-image as the good husband, provider, and manager of his boardinghouse.

Men who are financially stable are sought after by women who want a safe, secure relationship. A man’s self-esteem and feeling of manhood is enhanced when he has a good woman working at his side. Seth found such a woman in Bertha, his wife for twenty-five years. Bertha supports Seth in his attempt to start a business of his own, and she contributes to his feeling of self-confidence. She is a loving, caring, wife that demonstrates her maternal instincts when dealing with Zonia.

Men who enjoy their work make it their role in life. Bynum considers his work to be his “song,” a “song” that he practices every day. Bynum enjoys his work, and he affirms this when he says, “that song helped me on the road. Made it smooth to where my footsteps didn’t bite back at me” (Act II Scene II). He is saying that his work makes life comfortable.

Some men consider their work a form of art, something that needs to be perfected. Perfecting their art can be their goal in life, and when this is achieved, their self-image

the young girl Loomis' young daughter.

and self-esteem are established. Bynum works every day to bind people together. Sometimes he helps them find each other. Men like Bynum, who have no family, feel the need to prove their manhood by the quality of their work. They work hard to improve the quality of their work, and when this happens they build self-esteem. While Bynum practices his art, he looks for the "shiny man." The "shiny man" is symbolic, a person his father told him about who will allow him to "know that his song has been accepted and worked its full power in the world and he could lay down and die a happy man. A man who done left his mark on life" (Act II Scene V). Bynum perfects his art, achieves his goal, and establishes his self-image and self-esteem when he sees Herald Loomis as the "shiny man."

When men lose their jobs they lose their ability to perform what they consider their primary role in life as the provider for their family. This can have a devastating affect on a man's self-esteem. Herald Loomis lost his job as sharecropper and deacon of his church when Joe Turner forced him into slavery. This has a devastating affect on Loomis' ability to provide for his family. He loses his self-esteem as a result, and even his ability to function as a family member.

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Men who lose their occupation lose their identity. They become confused and depressed, and they find themselves searching for a new self-image. Loomis is confused and depressed when he is released by Joe Turner and finds his wife gone. He is searching for a new self-image when he searches for his wife. The loss of his occupation and identity cause him serious psychological problems. He loses his faith in god and his desire to find work as Seth complains when he says, "He don't work nowhere. Just go out and come back. Go out and come back" (Act I Scene II).

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Relationships between men and women can be damaged when men lose their ability to perform their role as provider for the family. In Loomis' case, his relationship with his wife ends when he loses his role as provider for his family. He finds that his wife has gone on with her life, a life that has "killed and buried him" (Act II Scene V).

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Today men's self-images are as important to them as they always have been. Studies show that "financial deprivation, alternate roles, and social support effect a person's self-esteem" (Waters 1). Men today are as concerned about their ability to maintain their roles as breadwinner as they were in the early twentieth century. Today as in earlier times, unemployment and the disruption of a man's ability to maintain his self-image can have serious psychological consequences for the male. His relationship with his family and dependents can also be damaged. The study by Lea E. Waters and Kathleen A. Moore states that, "It seems that for a man, whose identity may still largely be conceived as that of the breadwinner (Kulik, 2001), a loss in wages prevents him from fulfilling his primary role obligations, and this can be devastating to his self-esteem" (Waters 8). Men who lose their jobs today face the challenge of regenerating their self-esteem and regaining their status as the breadwinner. Some men do this by changing careers, and others rebuild their self-esteem by setting new goals for themselves.

My personal experiences have shown me how vital it is for a man's self-esteem to be the breadwinner. Like Mr. Loomis, Seth, and the other characters in August Wilson's play, Joe Turner's Come and Gone; I, personally, have experienced the disruption of my ability to work and suffered serious psychological consequences. I was diagnosed with depression and had a lack of goals in my life after health problems forced me to retire on disability. Like Loomis, I had to begin a new life to regenerate my self-image and self-

esteem. I chose to return to school and have established the goal of acquiring a degree in general education.

In conclusion, you can see, each male character has a different self-image and expectation about what it is to be a man. Some have concerns about women and how to relate to them. Some have concerns about their careers. Some are just challenged by their efforts to fulfill the expectations of being a man. They each go about resolving their individual problems in their own unique ways, just as men do today.

Works Cited

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