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The individual and tradition in the fiction of Ernest J. Gaines

Anthony, Booker T., Ph.D.
The Ohio State University, 1988

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THE INDIVIDUAL AND TRADITION IN THE FICTION
OF ERNEST J. GAINES

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree Doctor of
Philosophy in the Graduate School of
the Ohio State University

By

Booker T. Anthony, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University

1988

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To my parents
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction

Ernest J. Gaines, an Afro-American novelist and short story writer, was born to Manuel and Adrienne J. (Colar) Gaines on January 15, 1933, "in the bayou country near Oscar, Louisiana, which lies about twenty-five miles northwest of Baton Rouge in Pointe Coupee parish."/1/ His father was a laborer on a Louisiana plantation, and even Gaines worked on a plantation until he moved away at fifteen years of age./2/ Gaines completed high school and junior college in Vallejo, California, where his mother had moved with his stepfather. This was around 1948. For a while, Gaines wandered the streets of Vallejo, trying to decide what to do. Occasionally, he visited the public library.

From 1953 to 1955, Gaines served in the army. Afterwards, he enrolled in San Francisco State College and was graduated in 1957 with a B.A. degree. The beginning of Gaines's writing career came in 1955 when he was awarded a Wallace Stegner Fellowship to study creative writing at Stanford University, "where he spent the 1958-1959 academic year."/3/ As early as 1956, Gaines had begun publishing his work in little
magazines. In 1959, he published "Comeback," a story which earned him the recognition of the Joseph Henry Jackson Award. In 1964, Gaines published Catherine Carmier, written while he was at Stanford. The plot and theme of Catherine Carmier came to Gaines after he read Turgenev's Fathers and Sons, a novel of rebellion that presents a lively picture of conflict between the older and the new generation in time of change.\(^4\)

Although Gaines's second book to be published was Of Love and Dust (1967), he had already published three short stories: "A Long Day in November," "Just Like a Tree," and "The Sky Is Gray." These three, along with "Three Men" and "Bloodline" were later published as a collection entitled Bloodline (1968). "Three Men" and Of Love and Dust should be read together, since the idea which inspired Gaines to write the novel is a spin-off from the idea which inspired him to write the short story. The first idea came to Gaines as he was listening to a verse from Lightnin' Hopkins' record entitled "Mr. Tim Moore's Farm": "The worst thing this black man ever done, when I moved my wife and family to Mr. Tim Moore's Farm. Mr. Tim Moore's man never stand and grin, say if you keep out the graveyard, nigger, I'll keep you out the pen."/5/
Gaines received the second idea from an experience two years later in 1958 when a friend and he had gone to a bar in the country. "So it was here that I saw the knife-fight between the two young men," says Gaines in an interview. "Fortunately, for both, the fight was stopped before either was fatally wounded. Now, when I saw this fight, just as when I heard the record by Lightnin' Hopkins, I had no idea that either event would eventually lead into writing Of Love and Dust, or writing anything else. There was a period of eight or ten years between those events and the time I wrote one word of the book."

Gaines's best known novel, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), portrays a legendary black woman who has lived 110 years and who has been both a slave and witness to the black militancy of the 1960s. Gaines's next novel, In My Father's House (1978), has as its premise the dilemma of a man who is torn between the past and the present. Five years later, Gaines followed this novel with A Gathering of Old Men (1983), which examines the principle upon which America was founded: "E Pluribus Unum." This is also the principle, says Ralph Ellison, by which black Americans
can best find themselves, individually and collectively, in a culture dominated by whites./7/

From Catherine Carmier to A Gathering of Old Men, Gaines is concerned with the effect of racism on people. The present study not only examines the various aspects of racism as a tradition but also shows how the external and internal forces of this tradition influence the characters' ability or inability to deal with personal and social struggle. The term "tradition" generally brings to mind beliefs and customs handed down by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another. The term can also be used to refer to an inherited pattern of thought or action.

In the first chapter, Catherine Carmier (1964) is analyzed in terms of the relationship between stasis and change. The problem that some critics have with the novel is that it "seems to float outside time and place rather than being solidly anchored in the real world of the modern South."/8/ Although it is set at the time of the Civil Rights movement, the novel does not dwell on political and contemporary situations but concentrates on the emotional situations of people. In this sense, the force of tradition is internal. The
status quo that the main character upsets is not necessarily the right of the people to drink beer in the white man's store but the hatred and prejudice that have been passed from generation to generation in the Carmier family.

_Bloodline_ is the focus of CHAPTER TWO. In this collection of stories, tradition is represented by communities or societies that prescribe the patterns of man's total existence. Anyone who steps outside such patterns, contends Addison Gayle, becomes a paradigm for future generations./9/ The circumscribed historical patterns of which Gayle speaks are also evident in _Of Love and Dust_, the focus of chapter three. Rebellion, however, seems to take on a different meaning. Initially, the main character rebels because he is peevish; he is seen differently when he recognizes that he is not the only one bound by a decadent community and when he attempts to free others from a society that imprisons one's mind and body.

CHAPTER FOUR is concerned with _The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman_. This novel, as one critic puts it, "represents a flowering of elements introduced in
The theme of rebellion against the static rules of the South is one example. The title character becomes one of many who "turn their rebellions into positive leadership." This chapter also examines fear of rebellion, an internal force of tradition that helps explain the slow process of social change in the South.

In My Father's House is the focus of CHAPTER FIVE. Gaines's further development of fiction around the Civil Rights demonstrations reveals the influences of external forces on tradition, such as racism and discrimination. The internal force is seen in the main character's separation from the entire community. This chapter is followed with an analysis of A Gathering of Old Men, a novel of two family traditions, one known for racial bigotry and violence and the other for pride and sometimes fear of oppression. The action of the novel begins when a member of the first group acts rashly in the tradition of hatred.

The findings of this study indicate that although Gaines's characters are trapped in circumstances of history and custom, the characters, as Theodore R. Hudson states, do not capitulate. Rather, "they adapt
to or deflect adversity or they bide their time or they revolt. Most importantly, they endure."/12/ This study also demonstrates that whether Gaines's characters rebel against or embrace tradition, they become victims. The few victories, however, almost always precede or follow a sacrifice, loss, or tragedy, either to the characters effecting change or to those upon whom change is forced. The absence of many victories in the novels shows that Gaines is aware that traditions do not develop overnight and, therefore, cannot be conquered in one day. The lack of many victories may also explain why Gaines's characters must endure.

Endurance relates to Gaines's emphasis on the process of overcoming fear, prejudice, racism, excessive pride, and other aspects of tradition. None of Gaines's characters wins the battle permanently. For defeated characters, there is a moral victory in the struggle itself. From novel to novel, Gaines develops morally strong characters who contribute to this struggle toward personal and social freedom, to the process of overcoming unexamined traditions.
Gaines, however, is not the only black novelist who has been concerned with specific elements and influences of tradition on people. Prejudice, sex and race situations, love and hate have been the theme of many a novel before and since Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Anne Petry's *The Street* (1946), William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941), Junius Edwards' *If We Must Die* (1963), Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). But novels by Wright, Petry, Himes, and some others have often been dismissed as race novels or protest novels. Hoyt Fuller has the following to say about the rationale behind such labelling:

Negro literature is dismissed as 'protest literature' because, if it deals honestly with Negro life, it will be accusatory toward white people, and nobody likes to be accused, especially of crimes against the human spirit. The reading public must realize, then, that while it is the duty of any serious writer to look critically and truthfully at the society of which he is a part, and to reveal that society to itself, the Negro writer, by virtue of his identification with a group deliberately held on the outer edges of that society will, if he is honest, call attention to that special aspect of the society's failure."/13/
Fuller assumes that this particular focus is chosen because of the writer's experience with a particular society. Fuller further contends that the writer must do more than call attention to special aspects of society's failure. What is important, continues Fuller, is the author's work of art, "and most Negro writers," Fuller states, "are concerned with art."/14/

Gaines, who has never felt obligated to write for a particular audience, has a philosophy of writing that not only relates to Fuller's perspective but also closely parallels a statement by Saunders Redding: "The writer's ultimate purpose is to use his gifts to develop man's awareness of himself so that he, man, can become a better instrument for living together with other men."/15/ What interests Gaines is his craft, for he has been known to write five hours a day, five days a week./16/ He has always followed his own instincts in reference to what and how he should write. This does not mean that Gaines lacks sympathy for the black power movements of his time, yet he has distanced himself from the points of view of his contemporaries.

It would be a total misreading of Gaines's fiction to say there is no protest in his works. Hoyt Fuller,
referring to authors like Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis, maintains that "an objective examination of much of the literature which the public considers 'great' will reveal this literature to have overtones of 'protest.'"/17/

In other words, Gaines shares the same concern John O. Killien does in Young Blood (1954) and Then We Heard the Thunder (1963), novels which "take up the favorite themes of the young rebels: the frequent social and political emasculation of the black male, the corruptive influences of white value systems, the emancipating power of militant black racism."/18/

When compared with a writer like Baldwin, Gaines's personal awareness of his craft pushes his fiction a step above a work like Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (1968), which seems to limit itself in the search for "a cultural identity among the members of the American black community."/19/ Gaines believes that "the artist is the only free man left. He owes nobody nothing--not even himself. He should write what he wants, when he wants, and to whomever he wants. If he is true, he will use that material which is closest
to him."/20/ For Gaines, this is his beloved Southern Louisiana. And just as the settings of many of William Faulkner's novels are around the fictional Yoknapatawpha county, Gaines likewise chooses a fictive setting for his fictions: Bayonne.

The writer of this dissertation concurs with Keith Byerman's view that "Each generation of Afro-American writers seems to need to create a space for itself by claiming kin to no black predecessor or by citing the influences of European and white American artists, such as Joyce, Hemingway, or Turgenev. By defining their background in such a way [these writers] can use a variety of techniques to render Afro-American experience without being seen as limited to a particular racial tradition."/21/ Writers like Gaines, James McPherson, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ishmael Reed, and a myriad of others from Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass to Ellison have been successful artists because of the "way they have consistently turned European and white American forms and techniques to their own purposes."/22/ Hence, these modern and postmodern writers, and especially Gaines, do not concern themselves with being inside or outside the
American mainstream or the Black Aesthetics. What matters is that these writers as artists be imaginative and expressive in their own right.
Notes

1

2
Helterman and Layman 170.

3
Helterman and Layman 170.

4

5

6
"An Interview": 331.

7

8
Helterman 171.


14. Fuller 324.


17. Fuller 323.

Davis and Redding 568-569.

Laney 12.


Byerman 41.
Chapter I

Growth and Stasis: Catherine Carmier

Catherine Carmier (1964) is a novel about the conflict between generations. The beliefs, dreams, and attitudes of the older blacks in the Bayonne, Louisiana, of Gaines's novel are grounded in tradition. When the younger black characters challenge the old values, they threaten not only the whites, but also the older blacks, whose false sense of security depends upon their complying with established prejudices. Gaines's book sympathizes with both generations, but it demonstrates that social change can occur only if the new generation forces its elders to reexamine (and alter) the customs and beliefs that have formerly sustained them.

Catherine Carmier herself is not so much a representative of the new generation as she is a link between it and the older generation represented by her father, Raoul, a Creole who tries single-handedly to fight the whole Cajun race. (While both Creoles and Cajuns are descended from the French, the difference is that the Creoles also have a trace of Negro ancestry,
which places them "below" the "unadulterated" Cajuns, or the laboring class, on the white social scale.)
Raoul is married to Della, but she is his wife in name only. After Della becomes pregnant by another man and bears a dark baby boy, Raoul rejects her, and Catherine becomes his substitute wife and son. Raoul and Della have another daughter, named Lillian, but she is sent away at an early age and returns home only during the summer months. Resenting her parents for disowning her, Lillian communicates only with Catherine.

Despite Gaines's title, the chief representative of the new generation in this novel is Jackson Bradley. A young black man who has been living in California, Jackson returns to Bayonne and falls in love with Catherine, whose father forbids her to consort with any man, white or black. More than he fears Catherine's father, Raoul, Jackson dreads his own Aunt Charlotte Moses, the other, principal standard bearer of traditional culture in the book. Aunt Charlotte expects Jackson to remain in Bayonne and teach, but Jackson intends to stay only if the South administers better to his needs than California has.
Aunt Charlotte's values are the values of her peers, who seek to educate at least one black youth who can return and educate others. This youthful leader may be a doctor, lawyer, politician, or teacher. All that matters is that he be a model in the community. Jackson is Aunt Charlotte's intended redeemer of Bayonne and the embodiment of the older blacks' dream: "In ever' family," declares Aunt Charlotte, "they ought to be somebody to do something. We ain't had that somebody in this family yet. All the others, they been drunks, gamblers--and your pa, there, even 'fore you was born, he left your mon . . . ."/2/

Jackson is expected to be a model youth, and when he drinks beer in front of the children, he tarnishes the image that the community has prescribed for him. (Aunt Charlotte is not totally against drinking beer. If she were, she would not have told Brother, Jackson's childhood friend, to bring beer along with the other beverages. She just does not want Jackson to drink.) That exalted image is clouded further when Aunt Charlotte finds a deck of cards in Jackson's suitcase (97). Jackson claims he was merely playing whist with some fellows on the train. Aunt Charlotte associates
all card games with gambling, and when Jackson says that everybody plays cards for fun, Aunt Charlotte responds, "Everybody don't play" (97). To Aunt Charlotte, a paragon like Jackson does not indulge in petty sins of the flesh but is supposed to talk learnedly and win the respect of the entire community.

The main expectation for a teacher, in Aunt Charlotte's traditional view, is that he be a Christian. "I 'member when you got baptized," says a woman at the party where Jackson drinks beer. "You sure was a great little Christian. I hope you still keeping up the good work" (66). When Aunt Charlotte herself asks Jackson if he still belongs to the church, he defiantly says, "I haven't forgotten God. But Christ, the church, I don't believe in that bourgeois farce . . ." (100). Jackson does not believe that the church can help him to find himself, nor does he find any evidence that the church has improved the social conditions of Bayonne./3/ Blacks still must enter a white owner's store through the side door, and they are not allowed to drink beer inside with the whites.

Aunt Charlotte is not prepared for Jackson's spiritual rebellion. She even finds it difficult to
accept the physical changes in him, especially his beard: "She had thought he would look the same as he did when he left. Maybe a little taller, but that would be all" (28-29). When Jackson first steps off the bus, Aunt Charlotte almost faints at the sight of an apparently white woman at his side. The woman with Jackson turns out to be Catherine Carmier's sister, Lillian. "Thank the Lord," Aunt Charlotte says to Mary Louise, one of Jackson's childhood girlfriends. "You can't tell what might get into children head these days" (24).

Aunt Charlotte still thinks of Jackson as the little boy who used to lay his head in her lap, but to Gaines, his youthful rebelliousness is the black community's main hope for social growth. Aunt Charlotte's generation represents stasis. Along with the older blacks in the Bayonne community, she imposes standards of the past onto present circumstances. Jackson admits that "there have been some changes" in Bayonne during his absence, but he also maintains that "there haven't been any. The Cajuns have taken over the land and some of the people have gone away, but the ones who are left are the same as they ever were. Just
as that house and those trees were and always will be" (31).

The house that the older generation resembles is the Carmier house. Jackson describes it as follows: The "old unpainted house where the Carmiers lived . . . looked no different from the way he left it ten years ago. Regardless of how bright the sun was shining, the big trees in the yard always kept the yard and the house in semi-darkness" (30). Those characters who do not wish to live in semi-darkness, Gaines seems to be saying, must leave Bayonne. The blacks who stay become complacent with their values and conditions. When Jackson and Brother meet again after ten years, Brother says to Jackson, "Damnit, man, you done growed some there. I wouldn't 'a' knowed you." Jackson tells his friend, "You look the same" (18); and Brother's reply reveals more than he knows: "Yeah, me, I never grow" (18).

Little social growth has occurred in Bayonne because no one has forced the elder blacks to examine their values or challenge prevailing social conditions. When Jackson returns to Bayonne, he brings a new set of values, which include being free to think and read, but
Jackson cannot discuss books with anyone because no one else among the blacks in Bayonne understands him, except Madame Bayonne, his former schoolteacher. At Aunt Charlotte's party, the men his age turn their heads when Jackson walks by. They consider him "stuck-up."

When he visits the graveyard, we learn that Jackson is as detached from the dead as from the living: "When he came up to the fence that surrounded the cemetery, he looked through the fence at places where graves ought to be, or where he thought they had been. He moved along the fence, but he could not see anything. When he was a child—ten years ago—he could have found his way to any grave in the cemetery with his eyes shut. Today he did not know if he was looking into the same cemetery" (191).

Jackson is alienated from his past. There is no longer any vital connection between him and the people in the Grove community. The people who live in the Grove community and share the same daily experiences recognize the graves. Jackson is out of place in this community, and his not being able to communicate with anyone leaves him feeling empty. He had hoped that the
past would help him establish his identity. Now he finds that no one in Bayonne really knows how he feels. He dislikes not being able to go to church or drink beer in the sideroom with Brother, yet actually to do these things would make him feel worse. His problem then is to get the community, but especially Aunt Charlotte, to acknowledge his personal values and needs.

Aunt Charlotte is concerned only with Jackson's coming home to teach and does not understand that her individual plans for Jackson's future do not meet his personal desires. The climax of the conflict in values between Aunt Charlotte and Jackson occurs when she sees him on the porch with Catherine Carmier. Aunt Charlotte and Mary Louise are on their way to church but turn back after they see Jackson with Catherine. As fond as she is of Mary Louise, who helps her around the house, Aunt Charlotte does not want her to become too familiar with Jackson. Aunt Charlotte does not intend to share Jackson with anyone else; she wants him to spend all of his time at home. In short, Aunt Charlotte does not think she should have to compete with Mary Louise, Catherine or any other woman for Jackson's affection.
When Jackson comes home, he sees his Aunt Charlotte and Mary Louise on the porch and wonders why they are back early. "What are your two candidates going to do without you?" he asks Mary Louise. This would be the perfect opportunity for Aunt Charlotte to release her feelings about Catherine. Instead, she pretends to be more angry about his making fun of the church. After Aunt Charlotte reprimands him for his irreverence toward the church, Jackson breaks the news of his leaving. "But he had not said half of what he wanted to say to her when she staggered against the door as if someone had hit her with his fist" (162).

Aunt Charlotte does not stagger because she has seen Jackson with Catherine or because Jackson makes a joke about the church. Aunt Charlotte is furious because Jackson wants to leave Bayonne:

Charlotte did not think for a moment that he had the right to go back. She had sacrificed too much of herself for him. She had hoped, prayed, waited too long for him to come back just to see him turn around and leave her like this. What was she going to do after he was gone? What would her life be like after he was gone? All of her dreams, her hopes were wrapped up in the day that he would come back to her. (169)
Aunt Charlotte, who represents the elder blacks in Bayonne, does not acknowledge that her dreams do not take into account the aspirations of the younger generation. The older blacks in the novel have the church as the pillar of their faith, but Gaines has already shown that the church is doing little to improve social conditions, nor is it helping the younger people find themselves.

Jackson's generation may never find solutions to their problems, Gaines implies, but they must be free to search for solutions. Madame Bayonne tells Jackson, "You're searching for something, Jackson, that is not there. It isn't in California, and it isn't here... Men, not only black men, but all men, have looked for it, but none have found it. They have found a little of it, but not all" (80). It is better to search in vain, Gaines suggests, than to live by prescribed rules that hinder one's personal growth and free will.

Aunt Charlotte comes close to accepting this conclusion only after her conversation with the Reverend Armstrong. She is willing to listen to the
minister's wisdom because he is the arbiter of values in the black community. The blacks in the novel respect him as a spiritual leader and counselor. Aunt Charlotte believes that her wanting to keep Jackson in Bayonne expresses her love for him. Reverend Armstrong forces her to examine how her dreams of the past are causing her to lose the boy she loves. The minister reminds her that to love, not "to have, to possess," is the Christian way. In other words, Aunt Charlotte must be willing to support Jackson even if he makes the wrong choice.

Aunt Charlotte learns from the minister that the young people are leaving Bayonne because they refuse to bow to the rules that have governed their parents and grandparents. This message disturbs her at first, but the talk with Reverend Armstrong forces Aunt Charlotte to examine her motives for wanting Jackson to remain in the South. After Aunt Charlotte tells him how Jackson is breaking her heart, the minister responds, "But Mary must 'a' loved Christ that much, too; don't you think so?" (181). He goes on to remind Aunt Charlotte that nothing should get in the way of her serving Christ. The "first thing a Christian must learn is sacrifice,"
the minister says. "And to be able to sacrifice the thing you like most is the truest test you can have" (182). Jackson is Aunt Charlotte's sacrifice. After the minister has finished speaking, Aunt Charlotte silently gives her nephew up: "Electricity ran through her as if the Lord Himself had touched her. She knew from then on her life would be devoted only to God" (184).

The more Aunt Charlotte tenaciously clings to a false sense of security in Jackson, the more Jackson distances himself from her. At the same time, when Aunt Charlotte allows Jackson to be his own man, she is still a victim because she is freeing Jackson to leave with Catherine. Aunt Charlotte, however, is not totally defeated. Her giving Jackson his freedom to choose and go where he pleases frees her from emotional pain and gives her inner peace. Now that she has been made to acknowledge her insecurity, she can forgive Jackson and thus pave the way for a closer yet more secure relationship with her nephew. Jackson knows he has been forgiven when she tells him to eat his food before it gets cold. By abandoning her dreams for Jackson, Aunt Charlotte can concentrate on Jackson's
personal needs, one of which includes a relationship with Catherine Carmier.

"Catherine Carmier was Negro, but with extremely light skin. With her thin lips and aquiline nose, with her high cheekbones, dark eyes, and dark hair, Catherine Carmier could have easily passed as an Indian" (8). Catherine seems to be the only one who has not inherited prejudice and stubbornness from her family. Her father, Raoul, like his father and grandfather, has "little use for dark-skin people. They went by without speaking, and when you spoke to them they hardly nodded their heads. When they needed help to get in their crops, they hired people their color" (12). The Carmiers even believe themselves to be equal to whites, an attitude particularly shared by the Carmier men./4/

Robert Carmier, Raoul's father, demonstrates this attitude. When Robert first moved his family to the Bayonne community, Robert rode into town to ask about a large old house he had seen, but Mack Grover, a white man, told the Creole that the other house farther down the quarters was smaller and would be easier to keep up. Robert, without fidgeting, looked Mack sternly in
the face and demanded the large house. Respecting Robert's persistence, Mack Grover gave him the house he wanted. Gaines reminds us, however, in Robert's fray with a Cajun over a wagon race, that regardless of the Creole's sense of pride his Negro blood will always keep him subordinate even to the lowliest whites. After the wagon race, the men begin cursing each other. "I'll send you to hell for this," the Cajun says to Robert. Robert responds, "You can bring the whole goddamn family, just come in front" (13).

We do not know who goes to hell, but about three months later, Robert disappears. Both the Cajun and the Creole are reacting to influences of tradition. For the Cajun, no black man, no matter how much white blood he has, may bring shame to a Cajun. The Carmiers, reacting to a tradition of their own, believe that no man, white or black, is better than a Carmier.

Raoul retains this attitude of superiority. When he settles in Bayonne, he treats everyone in the community with coldness of heart, and he trains his children and wife to be detached, too. For example, at the tender age of six, Catherine runs home and tells her mother she has a boyfriend. The mother's first
question is "What color he is, baby?" (15). Catherine responds, "He's dark" (15). Della's permitting the dark boy to come into the yard shows that inwardly she does not accept the family's attitude toward other blacks, but because she finds security in the Creole family, she tells Catherine that the boy must leave before Raoul comes home.

Raoul has never been forced to examine his Creole tradition to see how it affects him, his family, and his neighbors. For example, he does nothing to bridge the gap between him and Lillian or the gap between him and his wife. As we will see throughout Gaines's fiction, the family is an important institution in society. In order for his family relations to improve, Raoul must be brought face-to-face with certain aspects of his Creole past. One aspect in particular is prejudice. Because the Carmiers do not associate with dark-skinned people, Raoul detaches himself from his wife, Della, who has a dark baby boy. Raoul rejects her not because of her infidelity, but because she has touched a black man.

This prejudice is also seen in Lillian's attitude toward blacks:
I'm not black, Cathy. I hate black. I hate black worse than the whites hate it. . . . I haven't opened my heart out to that white world either. But I'm going there because I must go somewhere. I can't stand in the middle of the road any longer. Neither can you, and neither can you let Nelson. Daddy and his sisters can't understand this. They want us to be Creoles. Creoles. What a joke. Today you're one way or the other; you're white or you're black. There is no in-between. (48)

Lillian, like Jackson, is searching for an identity, and she is angry with her parents because they did not protest against Raoul's people sending her up North. She hates her parents and thinks they have never loved her. There is much evidence to show, however, that they do love her but do not know how to express this love.

Lillian mentions, too, that there "is no in-between." One is either white or black. The Creoles are the in-between to the Carmiers. And as long as Raoul has Catherine and his land, he believes that he is invincible. But the land will soon be gone, since whites and Cajuns "have wrangled and wrangled until they have gotten everybody else to quit farming" (73).
Raoul is the last of the Creoles, and his not allowing Catherine to be married cuts off a relationship that could perpetuate his heritage. Michael Fabre contends that Raoul is clinging not to the American tradition, but to the Creole tradition.5/

The tragedy of Raoul's situation, continues Fabre, "does not stem from a personal hubris: It is not individual or moral but collective and historical because racial and economic polarization leads an entire caste to disappear." Lillian rejects the Creole tradition because it is destroying her family. She knows that Raoul cannot win against the Cajuns alone, and she wants Catherine to come away before she is destroyed along with Raoul. "Then why don't you leave?" she asks Catherine. Catherine asks, "Go the way you're going, Lily?" (46). Lillian goes on to tell Catherine to go any way she wants to, but Catherine says, "No thanks, Lily" (46). Catherine, unlike Lillian, Gaines intimates, cannot survive on her own. She seems to receive her strength from her Creole heritage and from the social limitations that the small community of Bayonne has placed on her.
Lillian, however, cannot live within limitations. She actually becomes depressed just being home again in a yard covered with dead leaves and with trees that have gray Spanish moss hanging from them. Catherine, on the other hand, can find excitement in killing a snake: "Missed him the first couple times," she says to Lillian. "But I got him. Scroochy little old thing" (42). In an interview with John O'Brien, Gaines states, "People [like Catherine] who have deep feelings are always tragic. They just cannot change the way that so many of us can."/6/

Although Catherine is Raoul's link to the Creole past, her presence not only interferes with Raoul's marriage to Della, but also leads to an unhealthy relationship between father and daughter. For example, Jackson's first attempt to make Catherine leave with him is unsuccessful. He tells her that, as far as he is concerned, she and her father "could have each other all to themselves for the rest of their twisted lives" (161). And when Jackson sees Catherine and her father ride in town together, Jackson "felt like calling her all the dirty names he ever heard anyone call a woman. He wanted to tell everyone out there that she was Raoul's lover" (175).
Even Catherine's attitude toward sleeping with Jackson seems to confirm the idea of a twisted union between her and Raoul. "After laying him [her baby, Nelson] down again, she sat before the dresser and looked at herself in the mirror. I feel like a bitch, she thought. I feel like a selfish and unclean bitch" (145). When she sees her father again, she stands on her tiptoe and kisses him as she did Jackson, "loving him as much as she had ever loved Jackson" (153).

Catherine appears to be Raoul's woman, and Raoul's sister tries to convince him that Catherine is not the answer to his problems. "No matter how much you love her," Elvira tells Raoul, "she cannot take the place of a woman" (212). That is, Catherine cannot take the place of Della.

At the same time that Gaines presents an apparently incestuous relationship here, he also shows how Catherine is caught up in the Creole tragedy. She loves her father and respects his ability to be his own man, yet she loves Jackson. "It was impossible to belong to both at the same time, and it was just as impossible to belong to one and not to the other" (136). In an article entitled "To Make These Bones
Live," Jack Hicks argues that "History is a wall. The once-nourishing confines of the houses of Carmier and Bradley, Gaines suggests, are reduced to rubble, walls of slivers that entrap no less than brick or stone. And if racial and personal history are prisons, any hope of community is dead."/7/

Before Catherine can leave her father, the Creole tradition or walls must be broken down. In a hotel room in Baton Rouge, for example, Jackson asks Catherine, "Have you ever been surrounded by a brick wall? One where there's no light at all?" (148). She tells him "no," but such a response, Gaines implies, shows how deeply she is bonded in tradition. Jackson goes on to tell Catherine that walls of any kind are wrong because they cause one to live in fear and hatred. Together, Catherine and Jackson can break these walls down, but first Jackson must make Catherine acknowledge her bondage. Her attachment to Raoul is so profound that she does not see through the tradition that controls her. And even if Jackson does convince Catherine to leave Bayonne, he still has to face Raoul, the source of her bondage. Raoul must be brought face to face with his family and personal history.
Raoul is forced to face this past when two Negroes inform him that Catherine has left her sister at a dance and gone with Jackson. Raoul becomes angry and confused. Each time he thinks of Jackson's black arms around Catherine's waist, his mind flashes to the past, to his stepson. It is Raoul's attachment to his Creole past that has separated him from Mark. As Della explains it, the Creole tradition is more of a burden than something to be proud of:

If that boy had been his, it would have made all the difference in the world. With people like Raoul, more so than with others, a son is the most important thing in his life. He's a loner from the beginning--but that son would be there to stand beside him. That son would be there to lessen this load of loneliness. He would be there to continue whatever [Raoul] had started and was unable to finish. But this was not his son--this boy was black. And instead of lessening this load, the presence of the boy increased the burden. (118)

Until Jackson shows up, Catherine has tried to play Mark's role. She has known, that is, how much a son means to a father. But when Jackson comes along, she becomes confused. Her social conscience tells her to leave with Jackson while her personal feelings tell her
to stay with Raoul. Abram Kardiner, author of *The Mark of Oppression*, makes a statement which sufficiently parallels Catherine's plight: "If I obey you, you will protect and care for me—if I want to be protected by you I must renounce certain gratifications and suffer."/8/

Catherine chooses to be with Jackson, who takes her home to gather her belongings and pick up her boy, Nelson, but Raoul comes in before she and Jackson can escape. "Boy, I don't want any more blood on my hand," Raoul says to Jackson. "I don't want any more gnawing at my heart" (263). (Raoul has been thinking seriously about Mark since he heard that Catherine and Jackson were together.) This gnawing at the heart of Gaines's men recurs in much of his fiction. In an interview with *The New Orleans Review*, Gaines states that he likes "someone who has to touch his chest every now and then to keep on living." A fight ensues between Jackson and Raoul, and Raoul is beaten bloody, tears running from his eyes. Both men are fighting over the same person. Catherine hits Jackson, trying to stop the fight, but this battle is inevitable, Gaines intimates, if Raoul is to be released from his Creole past.
At the end, Catherine goes to her father, who physically is hurt, and promises Jackson that she will come to him later. When she goes into the house, Della stays outside to soothe Jackson's wound and to explain that Mark's death was an accident and that Raoul did not kill him. Jackson's beating Raoul suggests a defeat for Raoul's past. Jackson has defeated Raoul's excessive pride, thus knocking down one of the walls of the Creole past, the Creole tradition. Raoul never thought that the strength handed down by his father and grandfather would fail him. Catherine stayed out in the field for Raoul, who "had to be hero enough for her," Della tells Jackson. "But now he's fell. You the hero now, Jackson" (247).

Will Catherine ever go to Jackson? Raoul tells her that she has "been the prop long enough" (244). She still wants to stand beside him, yet she wants to go to Jackson later. Della says that Raoul will make Catherine go to Jackson and that she herself will make sure Catherine leaves. Gaines himself believes, "I don't think that Catherine could exist outside of the South, I think that she would die like a fish out of water. As long as there is one other person left, she
would want to be there."/9/ Whether Catherine goes to
Jackson is not important now. She may never leave
Bayonne. What is important is that she can if she
wants to. The barriers in the past that have prevented
her from leaving or from being with other men no longer
exist.

Gaines's novel implies that instead of clinging
to the false sense of security of the Creole tradition,
Raoul will probably begin clinging to his wife. Raoul
loses the fight with Jackson but gains a greater
knowledge about himself and his past. While he is a
victim of a physical battle, Raoul still comes out
victorious because Catherine goes to him and not to
Jackson. Catherine is still the link between the new
and older generation. The novel intimates, however,
that Catherine is now a positive link. She becomes
Raoul's hope and is needed to help him cope with a
changing society. Catherine, moreover, will no longer
be Raoul's shield but will help him adjust to all
people in his community. Gaines's novel does not imply
that Raoul should be forced to give up all his beliefs.
Raoul must change his way of thinking, however, to
accept all races and to include all kinds of people.
To do this, Gaines suggests, Raoul has to survive the Creole influence in his path.

At the end of Catherine Carmier, we see a man who is put to shame before his whole family. Yet Raoul's physical defeat is a moral victory against his past. Raoul's manhood is based upon a false set of principles and has led Raoul to live in pain and fear and has separated him from other men—black and white. This definition of manhood limits the extent to which Raoul can be free to control his own life. Such a tradition, Gaines implies, must be reexamined. Catherine Carmier demonstrates, through Jackson's encounter with Raoul, that a destructive tradition must not be allowed to recapitulate itself in the attitudes and actions of the present.

The characters in Catherine Carmier cannot accept the progressive present because they are blinded by a sense of the past. Aunt Charlotte achieves her identity not in the Jackson Bradley who returns to Bayonne, Louisiana from California, but in the Jackson Bradley who left home ten years before to become a
teacher. When Jackson steps off the bus, she expects an unchanged identity. After Jackson has been back home for a while, he has to struggle with the identity Aunt Charlotte has thrust upon him. Catherine Carmier implies that such an identity does not show love, but imprisonment. Aunt Charlotte's expression of love does not allow Jackson to find his place in society. She becomes another force of society that attempts to define and thus thwart Jackson's manhood.

Raoul Carmier likewise is trapped in history—the Carmier bloodline. To a greater extent, tradition is trapped in Raoul, who is searching for a way to escape from the Carmier prejudices against black, white, and Cajun. Gaines's novel shows that the Carmiers are to be pitied because, being isolated from the community, they are unable to attain any normal social connection with it. The Carmiers' self-centeredness leaves them victims of their own hatred and thus creates a wider schism within the Carmier family, as we see in Raoul's relationship with his own wife, daughter, and illegitimate son.

Both Aunt Charlotte and Raoul are victims of false emotional security. Any real change, Gaines suggests,
necessarily involves the breakup of the world as Aunt Charlotte and Raoul have always known it; any real change means the loss of all that gives the two characters an identity, however false. Aunt Charlotte and Raoul achieve peace of mind once they admit or are forced to admit their bondage to the influences of the past. At this point, Gaines's characters become fully mature because they acknowledge the significance of seeking security in themselves.

The notion of manhood receives much attention in *Catherine Carmier*. Jackson Bradley does not think much of men like Brother who do not retaliate against a destructive society and who have accepted society's definition of self. Jackson has more respect for Raoul, who protects his land single-handedly from the Cajuns and who refuses to yield to the oppressor. Although Raoul's Creole past is defeated, Gaines still wants us to see Raoul as a strong man who fights until the end. Raoul, unlike Brother, refuses to live by prescribed definitions of masculinity.
In the first few stories of the next chapter, we will encounter characters who are not cognizant of the severity of their bondage to prescribed patterns of society. Some of the characters are willing neither to embrace or rebel against their destiny. In such cases, Gaines's stories demonstrate that choice (subtle and otherwise) must be imposed from without. Other characters in Bloodline rebel against tradition not for the good of society but for personal gain. This kind of rebellion results from a misinterpretation of standards of tradition that the community has accepted. The characters who create their own laws and establish individual standards become victims of oppression nonetheless. Freedom from destructive forces of society, Gaines intimates, is to be found in the moral strength of the group.
Notes

1 Although the novel is named after Catherine, it becomes clear to the reader later that Jackson is the central figure. In earlier versions, Catherine Carmier was the central character. After about five years of trying to write the book, Gaines knew it was time to send the book to the publishers. The first title that came to mind was Catherine, but the editor suggested that Gaines use a full name. Gaines called the book Catherine Carmier.


3 "On the verge: An interview with Ernest J. Gaines," The New Orleans Review 3 (New Orleans: 1973) 343. In an interview with The New Orleans Review, Gaines expresses his reservations about the church's ability to change human situations. He doubts whether religion solves anything and says that people must believe in something greater than they are in order to survive. Gaines does not see the church becoming a viable institution until the beginning of the Civil Rights movement.

4 Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University, 1958) 12. One of the topics Bone discusses is the tradition of superiority among Creoles:

When "Massa" had an illegitimate child by a Negro slave woman, his attitude toward his offspring was often ambivalent. On the one hand, he desired a better destiny for his child than the cotton patch and the
overseer's lash... creating a privileged group of mulatto house servants who were relieved of the more arduous duties of the darker field hands. (Bone 12)


10 John O'Brien 84.
Chapter II

"You not a bum. You a man": Bloodline

The Bloodline stories, like Catherine Carmier, are about characters who either embrace or rebel against tradition. Particularly in the first two stories, tradition is represented by the community. Gaines's black male characters in these stories are constantly in search of ways to express their masculinity. To do so may require that some of these characters choose ways unacceptable in the eyes of the community. These individuals are, for the most part, functioning within the constructs of a larger society which represents the values and patterns of the past, of tradition. This society controls and shapes the substance of the characters' lives.

Once again, Gaines is examining the relationship of the individual to his community. Gaines is reluctant to sacrifice the needs of the individual to the claims of the group, especially when forces of the community or group oppress the individual. Gaines's
stories sympathize with both traditional and personal views of manhood, yet his stories reveal that whether it is the individual who loses against the group, or the group against the individual, victory is achieved only when there is a positive change in one's perception of self or in one's attitude toward destructive traditional patterns.

Eddie Howard, the central character in "A Long Day in November," is one upon whom social change must be forced. Robert Staples, author of *Introduction to Black Sociology*, states, in a chapter on the black family, that "regardless of the meaningful role of women in pre-colonial Africa, the authority pattern is patriarchal. This male control was based not much on benign dominance, but on the reverence attached to the man's role as protector and provider for the family. He had to . . . make decisions. Only if he successfully carried out his responsibilities would respect and admiration be accorded him."/1/

By misinterpreting his role as a father and husband, Eddie alienates himself from both family and community. He misapplies the standard of man as protector and provider. Eddie believes that as long as
he is a dutiful supporter of his family he is fulfilling his role as a husband. He makes sure that there is always plenty of food on the table, that Sonny, his son, wears good clothes to school, and that a fire stays in the heater in the winter. Once domestic and financial concerns are taken care of, Eddie feels that a man should be free to do what he wants to. For Eddie, this means driving his car whenever he pleases and without his family.

Eddie's plight, as the story demonstrates, is typical of many black males who are not allowed to express their manhood in ways that white males can. Although Eddie may have an active sexual life at home, he still feels less than a man once he goes out into society. The car becomes symbolic of his Eddie's masculinity. His driving long and hard after work each day gives him a sense of control and self-worth that he does not receive elsewhere.

While we may show sympathy for Eddie's private needs, Gaines does not want us to forget Eddie's primary responsibility: his family. Eddie spends most of his time driving the car, but when he wants affection and love he goes to Amy, his wife. She tells
him, "Go back to your car. Go rub against it. You ought to be able to find a hole in it somewhere."/2/
The dominant society imposes upon the black man's consciousness of his masculinity. And even here, the sexual image confirms the idea that Eddie has limited control of the way he expresses his masculinity. The car becomes Amy's competition. "A man needs somebody to love him," he tells her. She replies, "Get love from what you give love. You love your car. Go let it love you back" (13).

In one sense, Amy labels Eddie as an adulterer. And until he can decide whom or what he wants to love, she takes Sonny and goes to her mother's home. Rachel, Amy's mother, eagerly takes her daughter in but reprimands her for marrying "that yellow nigger who don't care for nobody" (28). The grandmother is convinced that "a yellow nigger with a gap like that 'tween his front teeth ain't no good" (18). Rachel's belief that a husband should spend time with his family and should treat his wife with tenderness represents the community's views. But her view departs from the community's when she tries to get Amy to live with Freddie Jackson.
Her personal desires, Gaines intimates, divide the family instead of bringing it back together. Even Sonny, whose knowledge of marital matters is limited and who does not like Freddie Jackson, knows that a boy should be with his daddy and mother: "I just don't like him. I don't like him to hold my mama, neither. My daddy suppose to hold my mama. He ain't suppose to hold my mama" (36).

Eddie wants to hold Amy as much as Sonny wants him to. When Eddie comes home from work and does not see Amy or Sonny, he goes immediately to Rachel's home. When he goes on the porch, Rachel comes out and shoots over his head to scare him. Sonny and many others in the community look at Eddie, who stands "out in the road crying" (35). We sympathize with Eddie as we watch, along with the community, a man be humiliated in front of his family. When Amy does not come to him, Eddie goes to Reverend Simmons, hoping that the minister can convince her to come home, but the minister's advice does not satisfy Eddie: "Be strong, man. You go'n have to straighten that out the best way you can" (43).
Eddie's marital problem requires more than spiritual counseling, Gaines seems to be saying. The church cannot help Eddie until he acknowledges that his view of his role in the family differs from the community's perception of his role (Roberts 110-113). His going to the church suggests that he recognizes only those aspects of tradition that can readily satisfy his needs. But the church cannot help Eddie, because it is part of the community from whom his personal standards have alienated him.

When he receives no satisfaction from the church, Eddie reluctantly goes to another resource in the black tradition: hoodoo religion.3/ (Gaines's use of this primitive form of religion shows his acceptance of any practical method that can solve man's personal problems.) The first time Eddie talks to Madame Toussaint, she charges him three dollars. He has only seventy-five cents, and she gives him seventy-five cents' worth of advice: "Give it up" (49). But give up what?

He goes out and borrows the rest of the money to find out what he must give up. When he returns with the two dollars and twenty-five cents, she asks for the
whole three dollars. He argues for a moment until she asks him to leave. When he finally hands her the money, Madame Toussaint "sits in her big old rocking chair and starts poking in the fire with three sticks again. Her face gets red from the fire, her eyes big and white" (59). After she finishes poking in the fire, the hoodoo lady tells Eddie to go set fire to his car. "I didn't give you my hard-earned three dollars for that kind of foolishness," Eddie tells her. "I dismissed that seventy-five cents you took from me, but not my three dollars that easy" (59-60). The apparent foolishness of the advice, Gaines suggests, demonstrates the foolishness of Eddie's behavior toward his family. He thinks that a man expresses his masculinity by being popular in the streets. Madame Toussaint tells him that he is not the first man to come to her with such marital problems.

One man learned that he was spending too much time in church and too little time with his family, which is as important an institution, to Gaines, as the church. Eddie Howard is to learn from this advice, too, "before it's too late" (60). Madame Toussaint tells him that women no longer want to be treated as housewives, who
are home when their men come home. Women, she says, need love and kindness and like to be thought about some times, and not just when the men are home.

When Eddie goes back to Rachel's home and tells Amy about Madame Toussaint's advice, Amy says that she will go with him only if he burns the car. Eddie, however, asks if he can sell the car. It is not the car itself that is important, Gaines's story reveals, but what the car represents: Eddie's old values. The burning of the car suggests purification. Because Amy associates the car with a woman, Eddie must, in her eyes, be cleansed of his sin of adultery before he can reunite with his wife or be accepted back into the community.

Eddie's decision to burn the car shows his desire to submit to the standards of his community. That the community is present at the burning demonstrates their approval not only of the car-burning but also their acceptance of Eddie back into their midst. The real sign of community approval occurs when Rachel steps out of the crowd and says, "I just do declare. I must be dreaming. He's a man after all" (71). The people in this community live by standards that have been
grounded in tradition. Gaines attacks these standards only when they hinder the individual's personal needs. When Eddie burns the car in the people's presence, he displays his acceptance of their social standards. Eddie's beating Amy is also a sign of his love for her, although Amy says that she does not want him "to be the laughingstock of the plantation" (75).

Eddie complies, and she is happy, because now he has shown that his love for her and Sonny is greater than his love for a car. Proof of this love comes when Amy tells him that he must go to the school and talk to Sonny's teacher. Eddie says to her, "I don't know how to act in no place like that" (76). Amy tells him something similar to what Madame Toussaint has told all men: "Time to learn" (76). What men must learn, Gaines suggests, is that society places the responsibility of educating a child on both parents. Finally, Amy convinces Eddie to help Sonny with his homework and to talk with Sonny's teacher.

The Howard family is reunited at the end of the story because Eddie now understands that material possessions do not constitute one's manhood. Demonstrating warmth and love to one's family does.
Little Sonny is happy because his parents are happy. In the past, he has not performed well in school because he did not have his homework, and he did not have his homework because his father did not help him, and his mother was too busy. Now Sonny has both parents to give him love and attention. The story closes with Sonny's description of the warmth and love in his reunited family:

I hear the spring on Mama and Daddy's bed. I get 'way under the cover. I go to sleep little bit, but I wake up. I go to sleep some more. I hear the spring on Mama and Daddy's bed. I hear it plenty now. It's dark under here. It's warm. I feel good 'way under here. (79)

Eddie Howard loses his car, but we, along with the community, view him positively at the end because he becomes fully conscious of the needs of his family. He had hoped someone in the community would show sympathy for him since he had moved out of the home. He thought he was a free man as long as he had his car, but discovered later that he was isolated, not free. When he was willing to sacrifice his old identity, Eddie Howard discovered real freedom, not in material
possessions but freedom in himself and in his family. The physical or material loss resulted in a knowledge of true masculinity and in the peace, love, and warmth of a beautiful family.

Gaines demonstrates in "A Long Day in November" that it is all right for males to be loving, warm, and kind. In "The Sky is Gray," Octavia teaches her son, James, that boys must be men and not sissies./4/ The extreme to which she forces independence upon James cuts him and her off from their community, the people who can provide for her family while her husband is away in the army.

James's first encounter with Octavia's perception of manhood comes when Octavia tries to force him to kill a bird with a fork. Octavia does not have time to explain why James must kill the bird, for her first concern is to put food on the table. While we may sympathize with her economic needs, Gaines does not want us to ignore James's private feelings. James cannot stick the fork into the bird because he does not want to hurt the bird. When he refuses, the mother
slaps him, takes the fork, and commits the act herself. What she does as a means of survival is interpreted by James as physical violence. Her definition of manhood assumes that James must have "guts."

When James refuses to kill a second bird, the mother beats him again. Still, she does not explain why she is hitting him. Octavia hits her son, Gaines implies, to prepare him for the cruel world, which will slap him harder. Octavia does not believe that James will have a second chance in the real world. Society, that is, does not pause long enough for a man to make decisions. As William H. Grier and Price Cobb maintain in Black Rage, any mother, whenever she takes on the role of breadwinner, becomes "the culture bearer: She interprets the society to the children and takes as her task the shaping of their character to meet the world as she knows it."/5/

James must prepare now to be the man of the house, and in Octavia's house, emotional sentiments are reserved. For example, James bursts with affection to put his arm around her to show how much he loves her, but she believes "that's weakness and that's crybaby stuff, and she don't want no crybaby round her" (84).
James is afraid of ghosts, but he cannot tell anyone because he is the oldest and must "set a good sample for the rest" (84). His tooth has been hurting, but he is afraid to approach his mother, because he knows that the family does not have money to waste. Gaines suggests that Octavia, though thinking that she is preparing James to be a man, is actually teaching him to live in fear and pain.

When James can stand the pain from his tooth no longer, Octavia takes him to the dental clinic. The waiting line is long, and the patients are told to come back after lunch. Octavia and James walk up the streets looking for a cafe. James is hungry, but he does not want his mother spending money on him. As they are walking up the street again, the two meet a white woman who offers food and a place to warm up from the cold. Octavia flatly rejects the lady's generosity and gets ready to leave until the woman says, "The boy'll have to work for it. It isn't free" (113). The old woman represents the extended outreach or charitability of the community. She had noticed Octavia and James when they first passed by and made a conscious effort to stop them the second time. The
woman also recognizes Octavia's pride. She tells Octavia, "I'm not handing out anything. I need my garbage moved to the front. Ernest has a bad cold and can't go out there. . . . I'm old, but I have my pride, too, you know" (113).

By rejecting the lady's hospitality, Octavia rejects the support of the community. We have seen, moreover, that Octavia does not know how to receive love from her own family. We now understand that she cannot show and accept love outside of the family either. Upon leaving the store, for example, Octavia asks the old lady for "two bits worth" of salt meat. Recognizing that two bits is not enough for one family, the old woman "cuts a big piece off the chunk. Then she wraps it up and puts it in a paper bag" (116). Octavia's excessive pride, however, prevents her from being appreciative.

The old lady watches sympathetically because of her pity for Octavia, but especially for James. Octavia is to be pitied because she misinterprets the codes that govern the role of men and women. At the end of the story, she is proud to have James walk through the cold with his collar turned down. To her,
this is what makes him a man. The irony is that James is not a man, but an eight-year old boy who must be allowed to cry when his tooth aches, or to complain when he is cold, or to be frightened when he is asked to kill a bird.

In one sense, Octavia's limited perception of manhood and independence reflects the attitude of the college student in the story. Waiting in the dental clinic, James and Octavia overhear a college student speaking philosophically to an old lady about words in general. He says that he does not believe in God because "the wind is pink" (100). At first, the woman ignores the boy, as he does her, because who knows, she asks aloud, "what children go'n be saying next?" (100) Realizing that the boy may be serious, she asks, "And what color is grass, honey?" (100). He responds, "Grass? Grass is black" (100). She laughs but corrects him: "Grass is green, honey. It was green yesterday, it's green today, and it's go'n be green tomorrow" (100). The woman's comment supports a natural observation that grass, for the most part, is green. The college student argues, however, that we say grass is green because someone else says it is
green. He rejects traditional opinions and observations. He can say that the wind is pink because no one can see wind. Thus, he defines his own world.

Like the college student, Octavia establishes her own definitions and codes for James, and, like the young philosopher, her independence separates her from humanity. The difference between the two characters' philosophies is that the college student's individual perspectives do not cause others to live in fear. One either ignores and laughs at him, as the woman next to him does, or one becomes insulted and slaps him, as the preacher does. Or one can take little James's attitude toward the student: "When I grow up I want be just like him. I want clothes like that and I want keep a book with me, too" (100). Octavia's way imposes limitations, Gaines seems to be saying. Although the college student's ideas are elusive, the story pulls more toward the idea of freethinking, which seems to be the characters' escape from social restrictions. While James himself is too young to understand fully the limitations of both perspectives, he does know which one makes him happy.
The male characters in the third story in Gaines's collection, "Three Men," are still searching for ways to escape social restrictions. The men in this story talk about making changes or defending their civil and social rights and come very close to making these changes a reality, yet when the moment comes to act, the characters do not. The story is centered around nineteen year old Procter Lewis who turns himself in to the police because he thinks he may have killed a black. Whether he has or not we never learn. While in jail, Procter encounters two other men in his cell, one of whom is a homosexual. The other, named Munford, tries to convince Procter to stay in jail and refuse to be bonded out. Munford informs Procter that the dominant, white society controls and determines the direction of its members.

One of the forces of this society is the law that helps keep blacks under control. Munford wants to defeat this force, but he is too old and has been in bondage too long to change the system. For example, he
comes to jail every Saturday night because his temper causes him to start fights. Each time he comes to jail, a white man bails him out. The process is repeated each week. He does not like society's definition of him as a brute but is helpless to do anything about it.

The solution for social change, Gaines implies, lies in young people like Procter Lewis. Procter, however, cannot lead other blacks until he is able to define masculinity for himself and recognize that he is not the caged animal unfit for society. Procter's perception of black men, moreover, does not include homosexuals like Hattie Brown. When a nineteen-year-old boy is brought into the cell for stealing, for example, Hattie tries to stop the boy from crying by patting him on the side of the face. "Why don't you leave him alone?" Procter asks Hattie. "You hear me, whore?" (151). Procter's solution to the boy's sorrow is to force a cigarette into the his mouth.

Procter is society's tool, and the self-analysis of his promiscuous behavior with women further explains the lack of control over his life. The larger forces that control Procter make him think he has to exploit
women. Because he cannot use his manhood the way he wants to, Procter sleeps with women to prove to white males that he is as much a man as they are. He knows the meaning of real love because he loved his mother before she died. His reason for not loving other women is that "They don't let you love them. Some kind of way they keep you from loving them." (149).

Society dictates the black man's behavior toward black women in this story. Procter wants to break away from this stranglehold but, like Munford, does not know how. Procter even remembers what Munford says about how the system robs one of one's manhood and makes one inhuman:

It start in the cradle when they send that preacher there to christen you. At the same time he's doing that mumbo-jumbo stuff, he's low'ing his mouth to your little nipper to suck out your manhood. . . . If they miss you in the cradle, they catch you some other time. And when they catch you, they draw it out of you or they make you a beast--make you use it in a brutish way. You use it on a woman without caring for her, you use it on children, you use it on other men, you use it on yourself. Then when you get so disgusted with everything round you, you kill. (140)
The fact that Procter recalls this speech is a sign of maturity. He is beginning to recognize his own identity, humanness, and self-worth. He comes from a fatherless home and believes that no one really cares about him. "I got more people scattered around, but no use in going to them. I'm the black sheep of this family--and they don't care if I live or die" (145). While many young blacks are fatherless, Gaines still believes each individual has to stand by himself and make his own decision, and not be concerned with how society defines him.

Frank Shelton contends that Procter's "awakened feelings for others and determination to assert his manhood by enduring whatever punishment the white man can inflict are closely related." Once Procter realizes that he is not the brute society makes him out to be, but that he is a man with feelings and love for others, he is able to think more clearly about how to direct his own destiny. His silent scream suggests that he wants to release his emotions and help those who are in bondage as he is, but he wonders if those in jail with him will follow. He tells the youth in the cell with him, "I better not ever catch you in here
again" (154). Procter now becomes a father of the fatherless. He is ready to face his oppressors but is not sure he is ready to take the beatings from the police. If he yields to the police, he will always be controlled. He must prove to his enemies what Munford tells him earlier: "Face don't make a man--black or white. Face don't make him and . . . fighting don't make him--neither killing. None of this prove you a man. Cause animals can . . . kill, can fight" (138).

What makes a man, Gaines's story reveals, is one's desire to overturn a society that robs one of one's humanity and one's dignity. This struggle will necessarily involve sacrifices. Procter's struggle will begin when the bailiff comes for him. In his mind, he is on the verge of acting, yet he is afraid because he has witnessed the physical abuse that white oppressors can inflict upon blacks. He thinks he is ready to fight but is not sure he will have courage when the time comes. For the present time, it is easier to give in to the system rather than fight against it.

Procter is the blacks' last opportunity in this story to effect social changes. Munford is too old to
make trouble, Hattie is too effeminate, and the fifteen year old boy is too inexperienced. Lewis, then, must decide whether the system will continue to degrade blacks and define them as brutes. If he does not rebel, the jails will remain filled with black youths. And young blacks who steal to survive will continue to be whipped.

As the story has shown, change must be accomplished through sacrifice. Whether Procter will initiate change in his community is not the story's main focus. That he is conscious of the need to rebel is what interests Gaines. Someone else may continue where Procter leaves off. Gaines suggests, too, that Procter may have to scream louder if he wants others to follow.

The protagonist of Gaines's title story, "Bloodline," does indeed scream out in order to force his enemies to break away from established Southern "rules." Copper Laurent's scream is not heard, however, because of the blacks' fear of the idea of rebellion and because the whites are too grounded in
tradition to accept social change. He wants to tear down this tradition and make the South a better place for everyone. The process of change begins when he tries to seek his birthright from the white plantation owner, Frank Laurent (the brother of Walter Laurent, Copper's dead father). But before Frank will agree to a visit from his illegitimate nephew, Copper must come through the backdoor as the other blacks do. As a Laurent, Copper feels that he can confront another Laurent face to face.

When Copper does not come through the backdoor, he disobeys an implied rule that has formerly sustained the Laurens. Gaines's story reveals, then, that these rules are no longer enforceable. Even Frank Laurent cannot command homage from the blacks as strongly as his people did. For example, he tells Felix, the narrator, to go find Copper, but Felix stays and lectures to Frank about Copper's bloodline and rebelliousness. An order is given, but the black man does not move, primarily because Felix knows that Frank has no more hardness. "The plantation had taken all that out of him when the others died and left it there for him to manage" (165). Little Boy and Joby, two
other blacks in story, also disregards orders when Frank tells them to bring Copper to the house by force. Instead of leaving immediately, Little Boy turns to Miss Amalia, Copper's aunt, and says, "Hope that's all right with you, Miss Amalia?" (173).

None of the blacks in the story seems to be afraid of Frank Laurent. "I obeyed his orders because I respected him," says Felix, "not because I was scared of him" (166). Although the tradition to which Frank Laurent clings imposes limitations on to others and needs to be examined, Gaines evokes our sympathy for Frank because this tradition has left him no way to cope with social changes. Tradition has not shown Frank how to handle blacks like Copper who do not come when a white man sends for him, but the rules Frank's ancestors left are all he knows how to live by. And when Copper does not come the second time, Frank sends six more men to bind Copper, who uses violence against the men. Two of the blacks receive blows on the head with a scythe-blade, and another is made to jump in "a ditch full of yellow jackets" (196). The other three manage to escape from Copper.
When Frank realizes that Copper will not come through the backdoor, he goes to Copper. Frank wants to know how Copper plans to change a tradition with sticks and chains. Copper points to history to explain his actions. "Those are your creations, Uncle—the chains and sticks. You created them four hundred years ago . . . I only used a fraction of your creations. You have imbedded the stick and the chain in their minds for so long, they can't hear anything else" (209). Copper's speech reveals that a tradition which does not benefit mankind should be abolished. Frank believes that the rules which have formerly sustained him and his people may be changed one day, but he does not think he should be the one to change them. In short, he intends to defend tradition even it means his death.

Gaines's text encourages sympathy for both Copper and Frank. Frank has no more control over tradition, the repercussions of which have destroyed his mind and body, than he has over his plantation. He is as helpless as the blacks whom Copper wants to free from established rules. Copper, on the other hand, wants Frank to examine a tradition that robs blacks and
whites of freedom and dignity. Copper believes that "the earth for everybody," his Aunt Amalia says. "Just like the sun for everybody. Just like the stars for everybody" (161). Copper attacks the rules of tradition that rob individuals of their freedom and that are responsible for the suffering in the world. Copper has been in all the cities and has seen also the destructive, dehumanizing influences of the law there. Both the North and South are equally being exposed for their cruelty, a fact also observed by Alice Walker's protagonist in The Third Life of Grange Copeland./8/

Copper's awareness of how the law, a representative of tradition, affects humans is seen in his testimony of victims he has heard weeping in the prison cells: "I found a strain of hair, a long, brown strain of hair. I kept it for a while, then I lost it. It didn't matter. I didn't need a strain of hair to remind me of the horror I had seen" (213).

The long, brown strand of hair shows Copper's cry, and ultimately Gaines's cry for all of humanity. In fact, the "general" in Copper's title, General Christian Laurent, shows his sympathy for the world and suggests that he wants to be a leader of mankind.
Copper agrees with Frank Laurent that the rules cannot be changed by one man. But this does not mean that nothing should be done at the present time to change the rules. "Bloodline" is alluding to characters—black and white—who believe in the possibility and desirability of progress through accommodation. The implication is that social freedom will come or be given to the oppressed at some appropriate time in the future. Accommodation, moreover, means that the oppressed must be patient in regard to social and racial segregation and antagonism.

Frank tells Copper that it is wrong to act out of time, but Gaines's story shows through Copper's actions that the time is always ripe to do what is right, whether for a majority or minority. (In Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines comes back to this notion of time as triumphant over oppression.) "I'll be back, he tells Frank. "We'll be back, Uncle. And I'll take my share. I won't beg for it, I won't ask for it; I'll take it or I'll bathe this whole plantation in blood" (217). This passage illustrates Gaines's awareness that a civilization is not built in one day, and cannot be torn down in one day. The emphasis on violence,
moreover, suggests that tradition, which is itself brutal, sometimes must be overcome with violence. Tyranny must be overcome. Copper's generation is not as tolerant of traditional standards and limitations as Frank's and Aunt Amalia's. And even if Copper does not return, another illegitimate like Copper may come along and be more successful in claiming his birthright now that Copper has warned the people in his community of inevitable, social change.

This change becomes even more apparent in the fifth story in the Bloodline collection: "Just Like a Tree." In the story, black youths have been protesting against racism, and the angry whites have begun bombing blacks' homes. To keep her home from being next, Aunt Fe's relatives have come to the South to take her up North. On the eve of her departure, the neighbors, including a white woman whose family has always been protective of blacks, come to share their sympathy and say farewell. Aunt Fe's friends reminisce late into the night about her relationship to the people in the community for ninety-nine years. After the neighbors
leave, Aunt Fe kneels beside her bed, prays, eases back on the bed, and dies.

The whites in the community, more so than the blacks, expect Aunt Fe to leave the South, but her dying at home makes her even more victorious. Even Aunt Fe knows that she cannot go anywhere. She tells her closest friend, "I ain't leaving here tomorrow, Lou" (248). Aunt Fe cannot leave the South, Gaines implies, because she is the link from the older generation to the younger one in the same sense that the story itself reveals the "passing of one age and the onset of a new."/9/ Should she leave, the young people like Emmanuel will have no roots or no one to remind them why they are fighting for change. Her relatives from up North label Southern people as country bumpkins. James, for example, the slang talking dude who has come to take Aunt Fe back, is unfamiliar with the progress that blacks in the South have made toward social freedom. He refers to the people who have come to see Aunt Fe as "way-out cats" who do not understand why he and and his wife are taking Aunt Fe out of the "sticks."
Anne-Marie Duvall, the white lady who brings Aunt Fe "a seventy-five cents scarf," demonstrates in her reference to the bombing a lack of understanding about blacks' civil rights:

That was too bad about that bombing--killing that woman and her two children. That poor woman; poor children. What is the answer? What will happen? What do they want? Do they know what they want? Do they really know what they want? Are they positively sure? Have they any idea? Money to buy a car, is that it? If that is all, I pity them. Oh, how I pity them. (241)

The characters in the story who are struggling to bring peace in the black community and who are trying to maintain dignity and selfhood know what blacks want. Young blacks like Emmanuel remember the stories told of fathers and sons who were lynched, and of mothers and daughters who were raped. Emmanuel tells Aunt Fe, "I'm going to miss you, Aunt Fe, but I'm not going to stop what I've started" (246).

Aunt Fe actually does not expect Emmanuel to stop the struggle for social growth. In fact, her dying in the South becomes a reminder of hope for the younger generation. There is evidence, too, that even if her
oppressors had been successful in getting her away, Aunt Fe still would have been victorious because she is "just like a tree" that is planted beside the water: she "shall not be moved" (221). One can "jeck" on the tree, says Aunt Clo, until, finally, it comes up. Then there is "a big hole in the ground and piece of the taproot still way down in it--a piece you won't never get out no matter if you dig till doomsday. Yes, you got the tree--least got it down on the ground, but did you get the taproot? No, No, sir, you didn't get the taproot" (236).

Aunt Fe is like the taproot. Her body has been worn down to loose skin covering the bones, (247) yet her love, kindness, and goodness to the community will never wear down. The whites can drag her out of the house, but the mark she has made on the community is indelible. Like the branches of the tree that get caught in the cracks, "in between pickets, round hills o' grass, round anything they might brush against," (236) Aunt Fe will leave little pieces of her with those who love her.

Emmanuel is the evidence that Aunt Fe's roots will not die. What he learns from her is seen in Walter
McDonald's description of her character: "To Aunt Fe, it is better to sacrifice anything than be deprived of one's dignity or selfhood."/10/ Emmanuel learns that change comes only through sacrifice and that the fight must be accomplished without weapons. He tells Aunt Fe,

You were right. We cannot raise our arms. Because it would mean death for ourselves, as well as for the others. But we will do something else—and that's what we will do. . . . And if they were to bomb my own mother's house tomorrow, I would still go on. (247)

Emmanuel represents one of the branches Aunt Fe leaves behind. He will continue peaceful demonstrations against racism and hostility toward blacks. He may even be killed in the process, but if the bombings are to stop, or if the black man is to maintain his dignity, Emmanuel and perhaps many others may lose their lives.

The five stories in the Bloodline collection show that dignity and selfhood can be maintained only through sacrifice. Although Gaines shows sympathy for characters who are bonded in tradition, his stories
demonstrate that change is inevitable if families and communities are to live together harmoniously. In chapter three, we will look more closely at how established prejudices can destroy both blacks and whites.
Notes


3 Albert J. Roboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978) 80. In Chapter Five, "Religious Life in the Slave Community," Raboteau discusses the history of hoodoo. He states that "Hoodoo (also known as "conjure" or root work) was a system of magic, divination, and herbalism widespread among the slaves. Since New Orleans was looked upon as the prestigious center of conjuring, the term "voodoo" was extended to conjurers throughout the United States regardless of the term's original reference to African-Haitian cults." Raboteau also states that during the days of slavery, "Not only was conjure a theory for explaining the mystery of evil, but it was also a practice for doing something about it" (276).

4 "The Sky is Gray" is chronologically out of order in the collection since Gaines wrote "Just Like a Tree" in 1962 and "The Sky is Gray" in 1963, but "The Sky is Gray" significantly comes second because of the age of the narrator. Unlike Sonny Howard in "A Long Day in November," eight-year old James has a more mature understanding of the values of society. Here is what Gaines has to say about his narration: "an eight year old kid will be able to observe more than a six year old child. The six year old child went up and down the plantation quarters with his father and mother—you know: little schools, kitchen, bath, a toilet out in the back, and all sort of thing. Now the eight year old child must leave the quarters, that


7 John O'Brien, *Interviews with Black Writers* (NY: Liveright, 1973) 89. In this interview, Gaines states that he is not concerned with what happens to his characters after the fact. When the novel or story ends, Gaines says that his characters are on their own. What they do is "another story."


10 Walter McDonald, "You Not a Bum, You a Man: Ernest J. Gaines's *Bloodline,*" *Callaloo* 1.3 (1978): 49.
Chapter III

Victims of Change: Of Love and Dust

In Bloodline, Gaines's black men strive to attain self-conscious manhood in a society that robs them of individual merit or worth. These characters desire physical and social freedom: the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Acquiring this freedom often makes Gaines's characters outcasts or eccentrics in the eyes of the community. The stories imply that social freedom for the individual is good only if it means social freedom for all. At the same time, the stories emphasize the need for the individual to rebel against traditional patterns of prejudice and racism that continue into the present. The stories show some characters trying to slip from under the tyranny of social intimidation. In the last two stories, the characters are shown entering a new dynamic phase with renewed self-respect and self-dependence. These mentally and socially transformed characters recognize that society needs a new social attitude in regard to race relationships.
Of Love and Dust (1967) presents us with another black male who attempts to break loose from the paralyzing chains of racial prejudice, but he is unsuccessful. The novel is about a black youth who has been sent to a plantation to work out his time for killing another black male. While there, the youth, Marcus Payne, falls in love with a white woman. Both Marcus and Louise Bonbon become victims of society in an attempt to break racial barriers. Although Marcus and Louise are physically defeated at the end, we along with the narrator, James Kelly, class Marcus and Louise as culture heroes.

In the beginning of the novel, Marcus Payne comes across as obnoxious and cantankerous. He has been in a fight with a black man over a woman. When the other black youth pulls a knife, Marcus is forced to defend himself. Recounting the incident later, Marcus says, "he let the nigger get two good whacks at him (he always believed in playing fair, himself); then he threw that knife into the nigger's belly far as he could."/1/ After the murder, Marcus goes to jail, and Miss Julie Rand, who christened Marcus, arranges for him to work out his time on Marshall's plantation.
On the plantation, Marcus meets James Kelly whose role is to explain the plantation rules to Marcus. Kelly, who avoids stirring trouble on the plantation, wants Marcus to watch his behavior and to avoid trouble. But because Kelly seems to relate well to the conditions in the South, Marcus calls him a whitemouth, which suggests one who takes orders from overseers or one who delivers messages to blacks from whites. Kelly denies being a whitemouth, yet throughout the novel he reprimands Marcus for stirring up trouble.

Miss Julie, Marcus's godparent, yields to the system just as James Kelly does. She wants Kelly to help Marcus to understand Sidney Bonbon, the overseer. "Marcus is a good boy," she says to Kelly. The plantation, she goes on to say, has people who will care for Marcus. "I hate to see him come there. That pen can kill a man. There ain't much left to you when they let you go" (11). What Miss Julie does not know is that the plantation can kill. She says that Bonbon must break Marcus in. "Break" suggests stripping an individual of his pride and dignity. To live by plantation rules is to live without dignity and without a sense of self.
It is this sense of dignity and self that Marcus tries to maintain. Before going into the cornfield, Kelly advises Marcus to wear cool clothes, but Marcus has his own code of dress. Kelly even offers to let Marcus borrow some khakis, but Marcus refuses them because they represent clothes the white man thinks field Negroes should wear. Marcus's not wearing the clothes shows that he does not accept the plantation rules. Rather than bow to any aspect of the system, Marcus prefers facing the heat from the sun. "He had on a short-sleeve green shirt and a pair of brown pants," says Kelly. "No hat--not even a handkerchief round his neck. He had on a pair of brown and white dress shoes" (25).

Sidney Bonbon recognizes Marcus's pride and tries hard to soften him and make him like the other blacks. When Bonbon comes into the cornfield, for example, he rides his stallion behind Marcus, who throws the corn into the trailertruck that Kelly is driving. Marcus can "feel the horse's hot breath on the back of his neck" (36). "So now it had started," says Kelly. "Now they were going to give him a taste of what it meant to kill and then let yourself be bonded out of jail. They
were going to let him know (not that they cared a hoot for the other boy) that he wasn't tough as he thought he was" (36). "They" are the white oppressors in Bayonne.

Bonbon and Marshall represent the control that the system has over the community. As a representative, Bonbon must slowly make Marcus yield to the system. The incident with the hawk in the story illustrates how Bonbon intends to play with Marcus's mind). Before shooting the hawk, Bonbon lets it rest a little; he also lets Marcus rest "about ten seconds" before letting the horse breathe down the boy's back again. Both the hawk and Marcus are helpless and defenseless before Bonbon. Physically, Marcus is weak, "so weak now he had to jerk an ear of corn sometimes three times before he could break it off. . . . Already the rope had started to eat through that green shirt at his shoulder" (46). Bonbon eventually hopes to see Marcus fall in the field as the hawk does.

Although Marcus is physically weak, he is morally hard. He tells Kelly, "Nothing in the world can ever happen to me," and one thing he knows, "I ain't go'n die, that's for sure" (46). Marcus's will to survive
implies that he, unlike James Kelly, has the strength, courage, and ability to flout the limitations imposed by the white society. For example, blacks in Bayonne can buy beer in the white man's store but must "go to the little sideroom--the nigger room" to drink the beer. Kelly does not like this restriction and tells himself, "One of these days I'm going to stop this, I'm going to stop this; I'm a man like any other man and one of these days I'm going to stop this. But I never did" (43).

Kelly lacks the courage and strength to rebel. He believes that man cannot win against the system. He says that God, "the Old Man," no longer intervenes with man's struggle against the forces of society. The Old Man "had quit listening to man a million years ago," Kelly goes on. "Now all He does is play chess by Himself or sit around playing solitary with old cards" (51). Kelly believes that man must struggle alone and will never win: "he's not going to win, he can't ever win; but if he struggle hard and long enough he can ease his pains a little. I mean he can spread it out more and it won't hurt so much all at once" (52).
While Gaines's book sympathizes with Kelly's situation, Gaines does not accept Kelly's defeatist attitude but believes that one must struggle to effect change. To refuse to rebel against established patterns can also make one a victim. Kelly's solution to his predicament is to make "the Sign of the Cross," not because he thinks the Old Man will hear him but because he wants to stay in practice. Kelly is hopeful that change will come. But, as we will see with Miss Jane Pittman, in order for change to come, the individual or group must make a conscious effort to begin the process. Kelly, Miss Julie Rand, Aunt Margaret, and Bishop (as we will see later) do not accept change even when it does come.

Marcus, however, has no intentions of yielding to his predicament, that is, spend five years on a plantation as a slave to his oppressors. His rebellion against society, says Sherley Anne Williams, demonstrates that he "cannot accept a code of tradition which requires that he be no more than a dehumanized part in it."/2/ Marcus does not like the way Bonbon makes him sweat in the cornfield and would welcome any opportunity for revenge. This opportunity comes when
Kelly tells Marcus about Pauline Guerin, who is black, but she is Bonbon's woman (55). She is unavailable to any other men on the plantation, although Bonbon is married to Louise.

Pauline is a victim of society because she has no control over what Bonbon does to her. For example, Kelly informs us that Bonbon does not need permission to pull Pauline's dress up in a cornfield. Pauline is helpless in a society that allows psychological and physical rape. Because she has no control over how the system abuses her, she learns to manipulate the system for her personal needs. She demands, for example, that Bonbon let her leave the field to work in "the Big House" and that he replenish her wardrobe.

Gaines does not want us to scoff at how Pauline makes the best of her predicament, but he does have us question Pauline's relationship to her own people. For instance, when Kelly first points Pauline out to Marcus, Marcus becomes determined to have her for himself, especially when he learns that she belongs to Bonbon. Twice, he visits her and twice she rejects him. Meeting Pauline a third time, Marcus pleads for her attention. Pauline does not smile but is somewhat
disgusted with even being in his presence: "Don't you put your hands on me. I mean it, don't you put your hands on me, you killer" (98). Already tired and angry because Bonbon has made him unload several trailers of corn on a Saturday, Marcus knocks Pauline down twice.

Marcus believes that it is one thing to be insulted and humiliated by a white man, but it is even more humiliating to be degraded by a black woman. Whereas Bonbon strips Marcus of his pride—when he makes the boy cry in front of other blacks—Pauline strips Marcus of his masculinity. Had Pauline smiled at Marcus, the pains and sorrows that Bonbon inflicted upon him would have disappeared. Pauline now makes Bonbon victorious, especially since Marcus had looked forward to taking Pauline from the overseer.

Unable to make Pauline come to him, Marcus waits for another chance to compete with Bonbon. This opportunity comes when Marcus learns that Louise Bonbon has been watching him each day he passes her house. Louise has been watching every man who walks by the house while she is sitting out on the gallery, but no man has been bold enough to stop in. She knows that Bonbon is an unfaithful husband, and she welcomes any
moment for revenge. Louise knows that should any man touch her, Bonbon would fight and perhaps kill the man. The law would put Bonbon away, and she would be free.

Marcus falls prey to Louise's plan. He intends to make Bonbon as angry as Bonbon has made him, and, says Kelly, to take from Bonbon what Bonbon has taken from him:

He wanted her only for revenge. He wanted to get to her, not her getting to him. He wanted to clown for her, he probably would have stood on his hands for her—until he got into those drawers. Then that would have been the end. If they would have lynched him after, it wouldn't have meant a thing. Because, you see, they couldn't take away what he had got. No, he probably would have laughed at his lynchers. (116-117)

One of the sources of laughter, says Laurence W. Levine, is "the desire to place the situation in which we find ourselves into perspective; to exert some degree of control over our environment. The need to laugh at our enemies, our situation, is a common one, but it often exists the most urgently in those who exert the least power over their immediate environment; in those who have the most objective reasons for
feelings of hopelessness." To Marcus, laughter represents victory over his aggressor.

Both Marcus and Louise share similar motives for wanting to ruin Bonbon. Louise, for example, lives in a society that allows a married white man to have as many mistresses as he desires, but his wife must remain silent. Both, moreover, are searching for ways to escape being a prisoner of society. Both want to use the other as an instrument for revenge, unknowingly, however, against the same person. Specifically, Louise wants a bruise on her body for Bonbon and his family to see the evidence of her revenge. If she were to cry rape, the community would call her insane. Marcus, too, wants to leave a mark on Louise so that black, white, and Cajun would know that he is a man.

When Marcus goes to Louise's house the first couple of times, he jumps through the window, and Louise runs away from him as he romantically yet violently chases her around the room. After he catches her, Louise allows him to tear her clothes off. This violent play reveals Marcus's and Louise's hostile environment. It is this same environment that makes Marcus dig his fingernail into Louise's knuckles on
their first meeting. The environment or system that controls Marcus makes him callous. That he soothes Louise's sore finger by rubbing it lightly, however, suggests his true affection and character. The same dominant society has also made Louise hateful. She, too, can love but has never had an opportunity to show her affections until Marcus's arrival. This lack of affection shows the difficulty of demonstrating love in such an antagonistic world.

After Marcus's third or fourth visit, the chair-slamming and furniture-throwing stop. He and Louise become loving and affectionate. From this loving relationship spring two new persons. As Aunt Margaret puts it, Louise is just beginning her childhood. In the past, Louise has been withdrawn and would hardly speak to anyone except her daughter, Tite, who is sickly. With Marcus around, Louise sings a lot. Aunt Margaret says to Kelly, "Before Marcus came there she had never heard Louise cry in the house once" (233). Her cry is that of joy and happiness. Marcus even brings out the laughter and play in Tite.

This love-relationship also changes Marcus. Before meeting Louise, Marcus would make love to a girl
and not think twice about it. Now he is caring and understanding. He wants to help Louise and Tite, who are prisoners as he is, escape from Bayonne. He feels sorry for Tite, who has a bad heart and sympathizes with Louise who cannot prevent Bonbon's brothers from verbally abusing her, and who cannot stop Bonbon from sleeping with Pauline. Louise knows, for example, that she would have been divorced from Bonbon years ago if Pauline were white, but Pauline's blackness means there can never be a marriage between her and Bonbon—at least not in Bayonne. Because such a marriage can never occur, Louise can never be free of Bonbon.

To free Louise, and ultimately free himself, Marcus must first break through the racial barriers in Bayonne. These two characters must convince black, white, and Cajun that the time has come for a change. But Bayonne is not ready for change. Aunt Margaret warns them of the consequences of their plans to escape:

It won't end good. It's all right for the others [Pauline and Bonbon], the ones in Baton Rouge--yes, it's all right for them. They have the right to do what they doing. Everybody expect them to do it. It was done
from the start and it will always be done. But this won't end good. Even if she don't tell him, it won't end good. He go'n pay, she go'n pay, both of them go'n pay for this day. (162)

Gaines's novel sympathizes with Aunt Margaret, who is afraid not only for Marcus and Louise but also for herself and her people. She does not know how to win against a tradition that allows a white man to seduce a black woman but will not permit a black man to love a white woman. Marcus and Louise try to make her understand that any two persons in love ought to be allowed to be together. Aunt Margaret's response is that Bayonne is not ready to let a black man love a white woman and that "there ain't no North for y'all. There ain't nothing but death—a tree for him; and as for you . . ." (207). Aunt Margaret has been a witness to what can happen to blacks and whites who rebel against the system. Both Aunt Margaret and James Kelly believe that "Some people can't be happy together. It's not made for them to be happy," (243) Aunt Margaret tells Louise. The irony is that Marcus and Louise are happy together.
Because Marcus and Louise are happy and in love, they want to leave Bayonne and go to a place that will allow them to maintain this loving relationship. The only person who can help Marcus and Louise is Marshall Hebert, the plantation owner. Marshall has been expecting Marcus to run away sooner or later. When Marcus goes to him, Marshall tells him, "You're going to run, boy, and you know it. But you won't live to get out of this parish" (187). Marcus can get out of the parish alive if he helps Marshall get rid of Bonbon, who has been stealing from Marshall and who knows too much about Marshall's past to be fired. Marshall wants Bonbon out of Bayonne, and Marcus conveniently becomes the scapegoat.

Marcus is trapped because he knows that he is no murderer, yet he wants to run away with Louise and Tite. "I ain't no dog," he tells Kelly. "I killed that nigger 'cause that nigger was go'n kill me. But I ain't no hunting dog to go round killing people for nobody else" (197). Kelly tries to convince Marcus that Marshall is not to be trusted, but Marcus is determined to leave the plantation: "I can't stay here. Can't you see I ain't like that" (199). In
other words, Marcus does not plan to bow to the rules of tradition, yet he allows himself to be used by Marshall.

When he returns to Marshall's house to make the final arrangements, Marcus meets Bishop, a black housekeeper who tries hard to make Marcus leave. Bishop represents those blacks who have separated themselves from the problems and concerns of the community. He has never ventured down the quarters too far from the "Big House," where Marshall lives. On one side of the "Big House" is the church, and on the side are the quarters, where the blacks labor together. Bishop goes down the quarters only to tell Aunt Margaret and James Kelly how Marcus pushed his foot into the door of the house "that slavery built." "Any person," Bishop cries, "who would stick his foot in a door that slavery built would do almost anything" (216). Bishop has been too secure behind the doors of this "Big House." Marcus's pushing his foot into the door upsets a whole tradition with which Bishop is associated.

This tradition, which has formerly sustained Bishop, needs to be examined. Bishop has relied too
long on this past to give him strength and courage.
For example, when Marshall demands that Bishop leave
the room after Marcus comes in, Bishop becomes angry:
"Your people say I can stay here. Your people like me.
They say long as I was a good boy I could stay here.
They say if I looked after y'all and I was a good boy,
this house was my home till I died. They say that room
there 'side that dining room--" (236) Bishop believes
that his duty in the "Big House" is to guard the place.
His name, which literally means "overseer," implies
that he is in charge. The white community has
sanctioned him as bishop of the place, and he becomes
irate when Marshall tries makes him give up his post.

When Bishop does not leave, Marshall knocks him
down behind a basket and continues his business with
Marcus. Marshall assures Marcus that a car, money, and
a gun will be ready on the day that Marcus and Louise
are to leave. On the day of the trial, the verdict is
announced, and Marcus is innocent, just as he and
Marshall had planned. Bonbon is angry because he does
not understand why Marcus is free. Since the beginning
of the novel, we have known that Bonbon is no more than
a tool. We sympathize with the overseer because
actually he has no more control over his life than Marcus or Louise has over theirs. Here is Kelly's description of Bonbon's fate:

Bonbon was a simple man and a brutal man. . . . He was brutal because he had been brought up in a brute-taught world and in brute-taught times. The big house had given him a horse and a whip (he did have a whip at first) and they had told him to ride behind the blacks in the field and get as much work out of them as he could. He did this, but he did more: he fell in love with one of the black women. He couldn't just take her like he was supposed to take her, like they had given him permission to take her—no, he had to fall in love. When the children came he loved them, he wasn't allowed to tell them that. He probably never told it to Pauline, and maybe he never told it to himself. But he could feel it, and when he did he tried to show it by giving them toys and clothes. No, no, no, he never gave it to them, he gave it to Pauline to give to them. (67)

The same system that controlled Marcus and made him abuse women also makes Bonbon mistreat others. The system tells him to ride behind Marcus in the fields. Bonbon tells Kelly, "They [others who are used by the system] had it rigged. There, they got me working that boy out there and they laughing at me behind my back. They make me the fool" (258).
Although Bonbon dislikes not being able to win over the system, he further shows his limited control or powerlessness when he goes home and finds Marcus trying to steal away with Louise and Tite. Marshall, who is with Bonbon, goes to the field car, gets the gun that Marcus should have, goes back to his car and drives away. Bonbon is still unaware of what is happening. Upon seeing Bonbon, Marcus jumps off the porch and runs toward Bonbon. Bonbon stoops over and picks up a scythe-blade. "Marcus ran to the fence and jerked loose a picket that was used there for a prop. . . . He and Bonbon started fighting. . . . Then, for a second, everything was too quiet. Then he [Sun] heard a scream, and he jerked his head to the left. He saw that Marcus had lost the picket and he saw Bonbon raising the blade. He had time to shut his eyes, and even though he couldn't see, he heard when the blade hit. When he was able to look again, he saw Bonbon standing there with the blade in his hand" (275-276).

Bonbon picks up the scythe-blade to protect himself only. "If Marcus had made any attempt to run," Bonbon later tells Kelly, "he would have let him go, and there wouldn't have been a thing said about it.
But when Marcus didn't run, he had to fight him. Not just fight him, but he had to kill him. If he hadn't killed Marcus, he would have been killed himself. The Cajuns on the river would have seen to that" (277). (We should remember that even Marcus tells us earlier in the novel that he had tried to run away from the boy whom he killed.) We have sympathy for both Bonbon and Marcus. That is, we understand Bonbon's fear of the Cajuns on the river.

Nonetheless, Gaines's novel shows that Marcus is a stronger character because he refuses to bow to tradition and to rules that define his selfhood. The system tells Bonbon that he must defeat Marcus, and Marcus likewise feels he should defeat Bonbon, who, to the black characters in the novel, represents the higher, uncontrollable forces in Bayonne. In one sense, Bonbon is victorious because he kills Marcus, but he is not a hero.

Marcus is the hero, although he does not achieve what he set out to accomplish--free himself and Louise from being prisoners of society. Our sympathy for Marcus (and Louise) is greater because of their bold stand against tradition. Marcus dies trying to fight
the system, and Louise, after Marcus's failure, is sent to an insane asylum. Their failure to conquer the forces that control them shows that not even love can transcend the powerful social forces in Bayonne.

Marcus and Louise's failure is proof that the community is not ready for change. For example, on the night of the attempted escape, the whole town, but especially the black community, locks itself in. At this point in the novel, the narrator's real growth becomes evident. He no longer blames Marcus anymore for trying to change the rules of the South. Kelly's self-analysis reveals that he has no control over the dominant society, yet it is too late for him to commend Marcus and Louise for their courage. Bayonne will need more characters like Kelly to remind the community of two members who have sacrificed their lives to bring about change.

Although some characters like Aunt Margaret have already forgotten the whole drama of horror, Marcus and Louise have left their mark in Bayonne. His death and Louise's insanity, Gaines further intimates, are not a total defeat, but are a challenge for black and whites to follow in the future. What these two characters
have tried to do in Bayonne makes them representative figures whose death and insanity are symbolic of the individual's struggle against society, against tradition, and against rules that rob one of one's humanity. They are representative figures, moreover, because they try to impose love upon a community that lacks the ability to accept or give love. Gaines demonstrates this lack of love through the dust imagery. The hot dust, says Gaines in the interview with John O'Brien, symbolizes death. "When a man dies he returns to the dust," continues Gaines. "If you lived on a plantation you would find that there's no value to dust at all; it's just there."/6/

The dust also suggests the heat of injustice in this Southern community. When the novel opens, Kelly describes the onrushing dust: "From my gallery I could see that dust coming down the quarter, coming fast" (3). The dust is also present in Kelly's report of Marcus's fiery-temper when Bonbon asks him to load corn: "I went on down the quarter. It must have been a good hundred. That dust was white as snow, hot as fire. . . . You had nothing but hot dust to walk in from the time you left the highway until you got home" (82).
The dust is present, too, at Louise's house where Marcus is asked to rake leaves. "While walking across the yard," says Kelly, "she had looked down and seen the leaves--leaves that had been laying there ten, maybe twenty years; leaves on top of leaves on top of leaves; leaves that weren't leaves anymore, but had turned back to dust" (133). The dust also appears whenever Marshall is watching Marcus. And on the day of Marcus's trial, the dust is there. The last appearance of the dust is the evening Marcus tries to leave: "The dust was flying all over the quarter. In front of the dust was a car, coming up the quarter with no lights on" (274).

Each of the narrator's descriptions of the dust shows the dust moving fast. Marcus's death has also been approaching fast. The dust also captures the temporality of man's presence on earth. The unknown author of the biblical Book of Job professes, "All flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust" (Job 34.15). Kelly recalls a similar statement that the preacher makes at Marcus's funeral: "Man is here for a little while, then gone" (281). Marcus is in Bayonne for a little while, and he leaves
a mark for all the world to see. He becomes a victim in his attempt to abolish racial barriers in his community. Bayonne will never be the same because of what he and Louise have done. They have begun paving the way for social relationships to occur between blacks and whites.

*Of Love and Dust* deals with two kinds of victims: those who rebel against tradition and those who are bound in tradition. Gaines's book sympathizes with both, but it demonstrates that individuals can be free of racial and personal hostility only if more people like Marcus and Louise will stand against established prejudices. In chapter four, we will meet more rebels and victims. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* reveals further why Gaines's characters are afraid to rebel and implies that victory over tradition comes only with time.
Notes

1 Ernest J. Gaines, *Of Love and Dust* (New York: Dial, 1967; New York: Norton, 1979) 5. Further references to this source will be parenthesized in the text.


3 Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (North Carolina: UNC Press, 1968) 140-141. The idea that the dominant, white society asserts superiority over blacks goes back to slavery. Jordan asserts that "white men commonly, almost customarily, took Negro women to bed with little pretense at concealing the fact. Colored mistresses were kept openly... White men extended their dominion over their Negroes to the bed where the sex act itself served as ritualistic reenactment of the daily pattern of social dominance."


5 Charles H. Rowell, "The Quarters: Ernest Gaines and the Sense of Place," *The Southern Review* 21 (1985): 733-750. Rowell's research shows that there is much history behind the plantation quarters. "The quarters, as a Southern phenomenon, has a long history which goes back to the days of slavery in the American South. Originally, the quarters referred to the housing or living area--the physical community--of the slave master crowded the slaves into confined space in order to observe, break, and control them. The slaves,
however, did not allow the confinement of the quarters to destroy their humanity. Instead they transcended the designs of those who wished to control their minds and bodies, bonding together as a community through friendship and mutual protection."

6

Chapter IV

Triumph of Time: The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

Marcus and Louise are like chips on a stream. Both hold contempt for those who oppress them, and both want revenge against their oppressors. This revenge leads to a loving and carefree relationship, one which disturbs the status quo and later leads to physical and emotional doom. But it is this doomed courage that makes Jim Kelly, the narrator, slowly begin to admire Marcus and Louise, whose failure is the real triumph in the novel. That Marcus and Louise struggle to break free of social and psychological bondage makes them triumphant. Aunt Margaret's and Jim Kelly's generations are waiting on time to bring a leader who can stand against "Bonbon and his kind."

Early in the novel, Marcus, upon learning that Bonbon had been sleeping with Pauline Guerin, asks why the blacks did not "chunk" rocks on his house at night. Jim Kelly facetiously responds, "We were waiting for you to lead us" (56). Ironically, Marcus is the blacks' leader, a fact Kelly realizes too late. Both
Marcus and Louise plant the seeds of protest and social change. Marcus and Louise alone, however, cannot defeat Bonbon's kind and ultimately free the South of social stagnation. The novel reveals that all blacks must first be willing to accept change.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Ernest Gaines explores the notion of leadership even further. The forces of inevitable change against the static world of the traditional South continue to affect black, white, and Cajun. We still encounter characters like Aunt Margaret and Jim Kelly who are people of goodwill, but whose appalling silence against human progress does not lead the oppressor to respect the dignity and worth of every man. The characters in *Miss Jane Pittman* whose conscience tells them to react against the disease of oppression and social injustice recognize that human progress comes through the tireless efforts and persistent struggle of men and women—both black and white—together with time against the forces of social inertness.

Historically, the civil war officially marked the end of slavery, but the dominant, white society still holds blacks and, to some extent whites, in social bondage. Moreover, many of the older blacks in the
novel have become accustomed to being led by their white masters. When the younger black characters initiate positive leadership, they threaten not only the whites and Cajuns, but also the older blacks who believe that blacks are not destined to be free. Gaines's book sympathizes with both the older and younger blacks, but it demonstrates that social freedom not only can occur but will occur as long as there are characters who recognize that there is no spiritual force preventing them from effecting change and who are willing to endure the consequences.

Gaines's novel, as Bernard Bell states, is the second "major neoslave narrative." The first, Bell continues, of "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" would be Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1967). Miss *Jane Pittman* opens with "The War Years." Victory for the North means victory for the blacks in the South who have been suffering abuse and bodily harm for a whole generation (Franklin 225). Because the black characters in *Miss Jane Pittman* have never had freedom, they are unsure about how to react to Mr. Lincoln's emancipation proclamation (Franklin 225). For Miss Jane's circle of friends, freedom means at least two things: the right
to pick up and go and the right to have two names. But
go where? This is where Unc Isom and Big Laura become
significant as leaders. Unc Isom, an old man to whom
the blacks turn for advice and whom some have labeled a
witchdoctor, advises the blacks to stay on the
plantation as sharecroppers. Some of the older blacks
are willing to stay, but the young people are ready to
leave. The patrollers "ain't go'n just beat you if
they catch you, they kill you if they catch you now,"
Unc Isom warns his people. "Before now they didn't
kill because you was somebody else's chattel. Now you
ain't owned by nobody but fate."

The idea of fate suggests that whatever path
Gaines's characters take will inevitably lead to
disaster for some. To leave the plantation is to risk
getting killed. Staying on the plantation, however,
represents a step back into slavery. Characters like
Unc Isom are not used to controlling their own lives
but are used to being told what time to wake up in the
morning, what clothing to wear, or when to be married.
The young blacks are more defiant. For example, after
talking with a Confederate soldier named Colonel Brown,
little Ticey tells her mistress, "You called me Ticey.
My name ain't no Ticey no more, it's Miss Jane Brown.
And Mr. Brown say catch him and tell him if you don't like it" (9). The younger blacks recognize, like little Jane, that they do not have to be controlled by whites any longer and are ready to face the consequences of gaining independence. Jane Brown is whipped for being sassy and is made to cease her work at the master's house and work in the fields with older blacks.

Working in the field, however, has an advantage for Miss Jane and her people because they are not always watched by the overseer and cannot be accused of stealing from the master's house. To be owned by fate, Gaines implies, is better than being owned as chattel. Most of the blacks in the novel decide that it is better to be left in the hands of fate. Their minds made up to leave the plantation, the blacks head North to freedom, hoping to find greater opportunities and better social treatment than the South has provided./3/

They also head North because little Jane has already proudly announced, "I'm headed for Ohio," where she hopes to find Colonel Brown.

Jane Brown is the only character in the group who has an identity and goal, but she still needs someone to point her in the right direction. "Now, when we
came up to the swamps nobody wanted to take the lead," says Jane. "Nobody wanted to be the one blamed for getting everybody else lost. All us just standing there fumbling round, waiting for somebody else to take charge" (16). There is no leadership because these characters are used to being followers.

When no one else comes forward, Big Laura pushes her way up front and becomes the leader. "She was big just like her name say," Miss Jane tells the reporter, "and she was tough as any man I ever seen. She had two children. One in her arms, a little girl; and she was leading Ned by the hand. . . . But even with them two children she had the biggest bundle out there balanced on her head" (16). Big Laura becomes a black female Moses in her attempt to lead her people out of bondage and toward social freedom. Just as God endowed Moses with special powers of endurance to use against Pharoah and to lead the Israelites, Gaines gives Big Laura physical strength and endurance.

Her physical strength, however, lasts but for a short time. Except for Ned and Jane, to whom Big Laura hollers to grab Ned and run when patrollers attack the group, all of the blacks who left the plantation meet their destiny in the woods. What Unc Isom meant as a
warning turns out to be a curse. The massacre itself anticipates the many horrors little Jane is to witness throughout the novel. Albert Wertheim asserts that the "pattern established in the novel's first chapter recurs throughout Jane Pittman. Every impulse by blacks towards self-assertion or acting upon the freedom technically given them by the Civil War leads to their bodily harm or murder by whites."/4/

When Big Laura dies, fate makes Jane the next leader, and for the present, little Ned is the only follower. Before moving on, Jane picks up the flint and iron Big Laura used to light the fire with. "Both of them looked like little pieces of rock," says Miss Jane, "so anytime anybody asked me what they was I just told them, 'Two little rocks.' I gived them to Ned and told him it was go'n be his job to see that they got to Ohio same time we did" (23). The rocks are memorials. They become Jane's fortress, her strength, and her faith. The hardness of the rocks suggests Jane's determination and will to go North to freedom. They remind her that she has Ned to take care of and a river to cross before she reaches Ohio.

"How many more rivers I got to cross before I reach Ohio?" she asks herself. That she heads South
instead of North implies that Jane has several rivers. Her going South also suggests her unfortunate destiny. When she meets some blacks and a white lady, Jane discovers that she is not in Ohio, but is still in Louisiana. "Luzana?" Jane wearily asks the white woman. "We been doing all that walking and we still in Luzana? You sure, Misses?" (26) The white woman tries to convince Jane to come back with them to the plantation. Jane, however, does not believe that freedom exists in the South. Freedom, to her, is in Ohio because Mr. Brown has given her permission to look him up when she is free. The white woman responds, "Oh, child, child, there ain't no Ohio. If there is, it ain't what you done made up in your mind" (29).

The white woman represents the voice of Jane's past, that is, the voice of slavery and of previous masters who may have discouraged blacks from thinking about freedom. For example, the blacks Jane sees lying around on the grass and eating are happy to follow the white woman's advice. One of the blacks becomes angry because Jane tells them they do not have to go South anymore. "We goes where us Misses tell us to go, little dried-up," the driver says. "She knows what she doing. Not you" (27).
This black's reaction is typical of many blacks after the emancipation proclamation. Lawerence W. Levine contends that "the Peculiar Institution undeniably forced its victims into a severe state of dependency, the result largely of lack of control they had over their own lives and destinies" (62). Jane lets this community know that she is in control of her own life and is not hushed by the white woman's warning that Mr. Brown "might 'a' been killed the day" he first spoke to Jane. "No Secesh bullet can kill Mr. Brown," Jane tells the woman. Mr. Brown represents Jane's hope, and Ohio is her promised land.

With the promised land as her goal, Jane is determined to move on. A man on the ferry tries to convince her to utilize the help of the Freedman Bureau, in which the government sends Northerners to the South to make sure that freed slaves have food, clothing, and education. Jane stays for a night with the man's family but leaves early the next morning. At one point, she thinks she has reached her destination but discovers that the man to whom she is introduced is not the right Mr. Brown. Still moving along the river, she meets a hunter who also tells her that freedom might not exist. He tells her that it takes the
strength of a man to survive in the woods and to use a bow and arrow. She assures him, however, that she has strength and endurance.

The next man she meets analyzes her and Ned’s fate. He tells her that it will take at least thirty years to reach Ohio. Once there, she will hear of hundreds of Mr. Browns. Someone may be able to tell her that her Mr. Brown lives in Cleveland. When she arrives in Cleveland, she may discover that Mr. Brown died ten years after the war. Jane thanks the man for his concern and asks, "All right, now how long it’s go’n take us to get there?" "I see, you still going," he says to her. She tells him, "That's where we started for" (53).

Again, Gaines's characters would trust fate rather than be controlled by white Southerners. Jane's wanting to continue her journey, moreover, suggests not only her determination but also her instinct that this man's interpretation of her future could be wrong. She and Ned journey on for another week until they meet a man on a wagon. When Job tells her that she is still in Louisiana, Jane decides to end her journey. The next morning Job takes her into town to sign up for work with Mr. Bone, a plantation master.
Mr. Bone sends Jane to work in the field and enrolls Ned in school. Not long after Jane and Ned have been on the plantation, Colonel Bone, who protects his workers from the Ku Klux Klan and other groups that "would kill any black man who tried to stand up and would kill any white man who tried to help him," loses the plantation to Colonel Dye. The new owner does not believe in having colored troops, colored politicians, and colored teachers. Because of Dye's cruel treatment of blacks, many blacks leave the South. Miss Jane, after hearing from Colonel Dye that the North's treatment of blacks is as bad as South's, loses hope (for the present moment) in going North to find Mr. Brown and concentrates her efforts on educating Ned, who becomes the first crucial social leader in the novel.

Ned Brown changes his name to Ned Douglass after Frederick Douglass. The name-changing, which starts with Jane and other blacks in the beginning of the novel after the news of the emancipation proclamation, relates to the characters' sense of self. Ned's new surname suggests his new identity and his consciousness of himself as a man of significance, as a man who is in control of his own mind. And his name implies that he
is to be a great leader like Frederick Douglass. Ned becomes a member of a committee in which he has to report on the blacks' labor, working conditions, salaries, expenses, and treatment from overseers (72-73). This committee work, however, endangers Ned's and Jane's life. The KKK comes to his home, slaps Miss Jane down, and tries to make her tell where he is, but she tells them nothing. When Ned does come home, she tells him that he must leave before he is killed. He wants her to leave with him, but she says, "This not my time." He tells her, "After the war wasn't my time. But I went everywhere you wanted me to go" (75). "People don't keep moving, Ned," she says to him.

Miss Jane's not leaving the South does not suggest despair but informs us about the notion of time. She left the first plantation after the war because she felt she had to. What is more, had she stayed, Ned would not have received an education. Now it is time for Ned to start another journey to freedom. "I didn't want him to go--God knows I didn't want him to go--but I knewed he had to leave one day, so why not now" (76). "Had to" implies that fate is sending Ned away.

While Ned is away in Kansas, Miss Jane meets Joe Pittman. Joe Pittman tries to persevere against a
dominant, white society, which makes and changes the rules others are to live by. For example, when Joe decides to make a living for himself and stop working for Colonel Dye, the colonel offers to give Joe more money if he stays. When Joe insists on leaving, the colonel offers Joe and Miss Jane land. After neither scheme works, Colonel Dye brings up a situation from Joe's past. "Just a minute," the colonel says to Joe. "Ain't you forgetting something?" "Sir?" Joe says. "My hundred and fifty dollars . . . to get you out of trouble when the Klux had you. You forget that" (81). No, Joe had not forgotten, but he thought Colonel Dye had helped him as a favor.

Determined to leave the plantation, Joe and Miss Jane gather the money, but when they return Colonel Dye adds an interest of thirty dollars. This money, too, is recovered, and Joe Pittman and Miss Jane move to "a place near the Luzana-Texas borderline where he could break horses" (80). That they are successful at leaving Dye's plantation and starting a new life is one way Gaines's book shows triumph over tyranny. "We was so proud we had moved," says Miss Jane, "so happy for the good meal we got soon as we got here, every time we looked at each other we had to grin. Feet sore, back
still hurting, but grinning there like two children courting for the first time" (84). But this triumph is temporary and becomes one more example, as Miss Jane will witness, of the blacks' struggle to break away from the control of the South.

Joe Pittman is conscious of the control that society has on its members. His philosophy is that a black man must be smart enough to turn manipulation into advantage.

The best thing I can do in this world is ride horses. Maybe I can be a better farmer, but the way things is a colored man just can't get out there and start farming any time he want. He's go'n have to take orders from some white man. Breaking horses, I don't take orders from a soul on earth. That's why they calls me Chief. Maybe one day one of them'll come along and get me. Maybe I'll get too old and just have to step down. Maybe some little young buck'll come along and take over Chief from me and I ride the terrible ones no more. But till that day get here I got to keep going. That's what life's about, doing it good as you can. When the time come for them to lay you down in that long black hole, they can say one thing: 'He did it good as he could.' That's the best thing you can say for a man. Horse breaker or yard sweeper, let them say the poor boy did it good as he could. (89-90)

Miss Jane wants Joe to stop riding the horses because she has been having dreams of his death. She
does not understand that if Joe Pittman is forced to stop riding horses, he will no longer have an identity. To stop breaking horses is to yield to his oppressors, to those professionals in the world who control him. On the horse, Joe Pittman is a professional; he is his own man.

When she cannot make Joe stop riding the horses, Miss Jane visits a hoodoo lady to see if the dreams are true. Madame Gautier explains that what Joe does is typical of every man: "To prove something." "Day in, day out he must prove he is a man, Poor fool" (93). Yet Miss Jane wants to know, "Can I kill that horse?" "Nothing can stop death," Madame Gautier tells her. "Death comes. A black horse. Lightning. Guns . . . . Can you kill death. Your Pittman will stand between you and death" (94). The black horse, like Melville's white whale, represents an abstraction. In his saner moments, Ahab is not mad at the whale but at the evil the whale has done to his leg. In other words, Ahab tries to kill evil, which cannot be destroyed.

Miss Jane likewise thinks that by killing the horse, she can prevent her husband's death. Death, like evil, is inevitable and indestructible. "Your Pittman will not break this horse," the hoodoo lady
tells Miss Jane. "Another man will have to do it. If he is true he will be destroyed by some other horse himself. If he's not true, then something else will take him. It could be grippe" (95).

Just to ease Miss Jane's mind, Madame Gautier gives her some powder and says that it will stop Joe Pittman from riding the black horse. But Miss Jane does not trust the power of the powder alone. The next night, she goes to the corral to let the horse out. When Joe Pittman hears the horse making noise, he goes out to the corral. As soon as the horse sees him, the horse lights out across the field, and Joe goes after him. "Early the next morning," says Miss Jane, "they [the ranchers] came back with the stallion and with Joe tied to his own horse" (93).

The black horse, argues Albert Wertheim, represents "the incarnation of hostile forces that try the strength of, and in this case, defeat the black man" (224). Miss Jane's wanting Joe to stop riding the horse, Gaines implies, shows that she wants him to give up the struggle against the forces that control him. Her knowledge of this struggle begins to mature only after Ned Douglass's return to the South from Kansas.
Ned's return is as inevitable as his departure was. He left as a boy but returns as a man, a leader and teacher. His philosophy of the black man's earning dignity and maintaining freedom in a hostile environment echoes Frederick Douglass's notion of reform. Douglass contends that "the whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. . . . If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who prefer to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters (Bennett 160).

Ned Douglass must convince the blacks that there is no need to be afraid and that better social conditions are possible as long as blacks are struggling in one accord. Gaines's book sympathizes, however, with the blacks in Ned's community who believe that social change is possible but fear that rebellion may result in a lack of freedom altogether. "Not that they didn't believe in what he was talking about," says Miss Jane, "but they had already seen much killing."
And they knowed what he was preaching was go'n get him killed, and them too if they followed" (101).

Ned is willing to sacrifice his life for social change. His philosophy is that reform involves people working together as a community. William Andrews contends that freedom and opportunity must be conceived in the folk mind and actualized there before it can be effected in the immediate social situation./4/ In other words, Ned must psychologically prepare these characters for political action. His "The Sermon at the River," an allusion to Christ's "The Sermon on the Mount," implies that the blacks must be awakened to psychological consciousness as well as political consciousness.

This earth is yours and don't let that man out there take it from you. It's yours because your people's bones lays in it; it's yours because their sweat and their blood done drenched this earth. . . . Your people's bones and their dust make this place yours more than anything else. (107)

The emphasis on bones and dust echoes the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezek. 37.14). One of the purposes of Ezekiel's vision is to revive Israel's lost hope and to settle Israel in her own
land. The bones, says Merrill Unger, "are the exiles; the valley, their dispersion; the grave, the death of their national life."/5/ The purpose of Ned Douglass's sermon, which is also prophetic, likewise reminds the people of their hope in hard times. Just as the Israelites were told that they would inherit the promised land, Ned reminds the blacks that the plantation fields and land rightfully belong to the blacks. "Your people plowed this earth, your people chopped down the trees, your people built the roads and built the levees. These same people is now buried in this earth, and their bones's fertilizing this earth" (108).

After Ned delivers his sermon to the blacks, Miss Jane looks into his eyes and sees death, but she knows he has no fear of dying. In fact, she knows before the sermon that he will die, because she receives a visit from Albert Cluveau, whom the whites have hired to watch Ned. "Can you kill my boy?" she asks Cluveau. Because of his friendship with Miss Jane, Cluveau does not want to hurt her. In fact, he and Miss Jane are fishing partners. Gaines's novel demonstrates pity for Cluveau as much as it does sympathy for Ned Douglass. Cluveau's will is controlled by the dominant, white
society. He is a tool that society uses to perform sordid deeds. Yet it is Cluveau's personal conscience, which is weaker than his social conscience, that makes him tell Miss Jane to stop Ned Douglass from speaking. He even asks his leaders to let someone else stop Ned, because "Jane good nigger woman." They insist that Cluveau do the killing. "Albert Cluveau, this your patrol. Maurios patrol farther down the river. If we say, Albert stop that nigger, Albert, you stop him" (105).

One month later, Albert Cluveau stops Ned on the road and shoots him down. Miss Jane receives the news from two blacks who were with Ned that day. Her summary of Bam and Alcee's story is as follows:

Cluveau shot him in the leg--the white people had told Cluveau to make Ned crawl before killing him. When Cluveau shot him, he fell to one knee, then got back up. Cluveau shot again. This time he tore off half his chest.

Albert cluveau swung the mule around and rode away. Bam and Alcee didn't go after Cluveau, they picked up Ned and laid him on top the lumber. The lumber was red when they got him home. Blood dripped through the lumber on the ground. A trail of blood ran all the way from where Ned was shot clear up to his house. Even the rain couldn't wash the blood away. For years and years, even after they had graveled the road, you could still see little black spots where the blood had dripped. (116)
Ned's blood represents the precious blood of the South. His death shows his identity to Christ whose blood was shed for everyone. Referring to the school that Ned was building before his death, Miss Jane says, "It is for the children of this parish and this state. Black and white, we don't care. We want them to know a black man died many many years ago for them. He died at the end of the other century. He shed his precious blood for them. . . . Well, there on that river bank is the precious dust of the South. And he is there for all to see" (113-114). The precious dust also echoes the "Son of dust" or "son of man" mentioned in Ezekiel and Daniel, who uses the term to represent the Messiah, head of the human race.

Ned has been head of the blacks in his community. When these blacks, who were once afraid to listen to Ned's sermons when he was alive, hear of his death, they cry like children (116). Now, says Miss Jane, "they wanted to touch his body. When they couldn't touch his body they took lumber from the wagon. They wanted a piece of lumber from the wagon. They wanted a piece of lumber with his blood on it" (116). The
lumber becomes a memorial of Ned's sacrificial death just as the true cross reminds some people today of Christ's sacrificial death. Christ's blood cleanses people from sin. Likewise, those who touch Ned's blood feel cleansed of guilt for not having fully supported him.

For Miss Jane, Ned's death reminds her of the myriad of rivers she has to cross. Albert Wertheim asserts that "Miss Jane becomes a symbol here of the horrifying long, silent suffering of her people."/6/
The horrors she has known include the beating of her mother, the brutal deaths of Big Laura and Unc Isom, the death of Joe Pittman, and now the death of Ned, who has tried to urge blacks to stand together as Americans. Ned has tried to make the black community understand that many persons have been killed because they stood up on their two feet. Ned has attempted to explain the difference between a nigger and a black American. "A black American cares," he tells them in his sermon, "and will always struggle. Every day that he get up he hopes this day will be better. The nigger knows it won't" (110). Ned's sermon demonstrates that a person's entire life is a journey of struggles--personal, political, and social. The individual's task, Gaines implies, is to persevere.
How Gaines's characters begin to overcome these struggles depends upon their endurance and determination, as we see in Miss Jane's efforts to find religion. In a chapter entitled "The Travels of Miss Jane Pittman," Miss Jane discovers what it means to cross a river with a burden of sorrows. Her experience echoes that of Christ in Hebrews 12, where the apostle Paul speaks of the cross that Christ endured. In her travels, much like a dream, Miss Jane speaks of a white man who asks her, "Jane, you want get rid of that load?" "Indeed, indeed," she responds. He tells her, "To get rid of that load and be rid of it always, you must take it 'cross yon river" (136). The white man represents an angel or messenger of God, and his suggestion is similar to Paul's message to the Hebrews: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight . . . let us run with patience the race that is set before us (Heb. 12.2).

On her way across the river, Miss Jane meets three persons who ask to take away her burdens. At the edge of the river, she meets a man who asks to help her. When she tells him that she must carry the sack alone, the man turns into Ned. "Give me the sack, Mama," the
voice says. Recognizing that the devil is trying to fool her, Miss Jane asks the man, "If that's you, Ned, tell me what you carried all them days when your mama was killed" (137). Receiving no response from the man, Miss Jane moves on across the river that has snakes and briars. The sack of briars identifies Miss Jane with Christ, who carried a crown of thorns. Like Christ, Miss Jane must bear her burden alone.

The second person Miss Jane meets is disguised as Joe, who tries three times to get the sack from her. After she rejects him the third time, the image of Joe mysteriously disappears. The last person she meets is Albert Cluveau, who became insane after shooting Ned. Cluveau, in Miss Jane's travels, is sitting on the horse that killed Joe and is holding the gun he used to Killed Ned. Cluveau, who is in front of Miss Jane, represents death. Ned and Joe, who reappear behind her, are those whom she has loved. None of them, Gaines implies, can provide her salvation and freedom from sorrow.

"But I would not turn back," says Miss Jane. "I would go on, because the load I was carrying on my back was heavier than the weight of death. When I got near the bank Albert Cluveau raised the gun to shoot me."
But when he saw I was 'termined to finish crossing he disappeared, too. And soon as I put feet on solid ground the Saviour was there. He smiled down at me and raised the load off my shoulder. I wanted to bow to His feet, but He told me rise I had been born again. I rose and I felt light and clean and good" (137-138).

Miss Jane's religious, visionary experience shows her identity with the blacks' social struggle in the novel. She is a pilgrim journeying through hard times, and if she makes it across the river, she will be free. On the plantation, she is struggling for social freedom but cannot remove the "sack of briars" on her back. In her visionary experience, she maintains control, but in real life she has no control. Gaines's novel reveals, moreover, that people will almost always be in the process of struggling to attain complete social freedom.

The lack of social freedom is evident in Miss Jane's narrative scenes about Timmy, Tee Bob, and Mary Agnes LeFabre. Tee Bob Samson's past teaches him that his black, half brother Timmy must never surpass him in anything, even in leisure horseback riding. When Tee Bob and Timmy go horseback riding, Tee Bob is thrown, but the overseer punishes Timmy and sees to it that
Timmy leave the Samson community. Tee Bob does not understand why his half brother is mistreated, and Tee Bob's father, Robert Samson, does not feel the need to explain how whites should treat blacks. Robert believes that Tee Bob will learn in time that the white man's mistreatment of blacks is a "part of life, like the sun and the rain was part of life" (147). Time, that is, will teach Tee Bob that he has a right to possess and control those who are less than his equal.

But is the dominant, white society always in control? "Of Men and Rivers," which comes in the middle of the Tee Bob chapter and is an allusion to John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men, demonstrates the powerlessness of the dominant, white society. Referring to the flood of 1927, Miss Jane reports that the white man would set up levees to stop the rising waters, but the waters would continue flowing. "The damage from that high water was caused by man, because man wanted to control the rivers, and you cannot control water. The old people, the Indians, used to worship the rivers till the white people came here and conquered them and tried to conquer the rivers" (147).
The rivers represent nature. To control the river is to control nature, and man cannot control nature. Man is little in comparison to the mighty, rushing rivers. "Now, if the white men had taken heed to what the river was trying to say to him then, it would have saved a lot of pain later," Miss Jane says. "But instead of him listening--no, he built another levee. The river tore down just like the first one. Built another one; river tore down that one down" (148).

Discovering that the levee would not work, man next builds a concrete spillway. "But one day the water will break down his spillways like it broke through the levee" (150).

The rivers are not only symbolic of nature but represent the flow of human life, which the dominant society tries to control. Slavery and racism are a result of man's attempt to control this flow. When Miss Jane says that one day the water will break down the spillway, we are to infer that she is relying on time to change the social rules of the past. That "same water the Indians used to believe in will run free again," Miss Jane tells the reporter. "You just wait and see." Miss Jane is assured of social freedom for the oppressed because she has already crossed the
river with her burdens on her back and has released them.

Tee Bob, however, does not have the Miss Jane's vision of freedom. When he falls in love with the black schoolteacher, Tee Bob rebels against the forces that attempt to define him and becomes a victim. For example, one of the implied rules that Samson community has held onto from tradition is that a white man can have a black mistress but must not reveal his true feelings for her. Tee Bob's closest friend, Jimmy Caya, tells him, "If you want her you go to that house and take her. If you want her at that school, make them children go out in the yard and wait. Take her in that ditch if you can't wait to get her home. But she's there for that and nothing else" (173).

Mary Agnes accepts the role that society has defined for her and tries to convince Tee Bob that Jimmy Caya is right. "We can't have nothing together, Robert" (176). The irony in Mary Agnes's calling Tee Bob "Robert" when other non-family members do not suggests her hidden love for Tee Bob. Personally, she does not want to reject him, but her social conscience tells her that it would be better for both her and Tee Bob if they obey the social rules.
But Tee Bob believes that these rules are unfair and must be changed. His wanting to take Mary Agnes away from Samson implies his desire to make up for the wrongs that the dominant, white society has done to blacks. His motivation is similar to the reason Miss Jane gives for Mary Agnes's coming to the Samson. That is, Mary Agnes wanted to make up "for what her own people had done her own people. Trying to make up for the past—and that you cannot do" (158). When Tee Bob recognizes that he cannot heal the wounds of the past by winning Agnes's love, he runs home and locks himself in his room.

Meanwhile, the Samson family receives the news that Mary Agnes looks as if she has been raped (though she has not). Tee Bob's family, along with Miss Jane, knocks on his door but cannot get into the room. Someone finds an axe and gives it to Robert Samson. "Every time he hit the door," says Miss Jane, "the water from the axe sprayed the people in front and they had to move further back. . . . Pictures of the old people shook on every wall. A looking-glass fell and scattered all over the floor" (185). The old people represent society—Robert's past, and Tee Bob's past. The pictures that shake on the wall imply that
society's standards are being toppled. This is the same society that has established the rules for the Samson community.

When the family does get into Tee Bob's room, they find him sitting in his chair—dead. "We all killed him," says Jimmy Caya. "We" includes those who have tried to make Tee Bob follow the rules of tradition. Tee Bob could not follow these rules and sought death as an escape. He had hoped, like Marcus Payne in *Of Love and Dust*, that love would transcend violence and hatred. Yet nothing could erase the fact that Mary Agnes "was a nigger," says Tee Bob's parrain to Miss Jane, and that Tee Bob was "white, and they couldn't have nothing together. He [Tee Bob] couldn't understand that, he thought love was much stronger than that one drop of African blood. But she knowed better. She knowed the rules" (194).

Although Mary Agnes, as a member of society, is partially responsible for Tee Bob's death, Gaines's book sympathizes with her lack of control over her situation. The only way she knew to maintain peace within herself and within the community was to repress her love for Tee Bob. Even Tee Bob was searching for tranquility. The letter the parrain finds in Tee Bob's
room on the floor expresses Tee Bob's cry for peace of mind. "Mama, I don't know what to do. I must go somewhere where I can find peace. . . . When you come to me, Mama, I won't be here. Forgive me. I love you" (195). Tee Bob cannot live in a society that segregates and abuses another human being. Death is his solution to racism in Samson.

Miss Jane asks the parrain, "He was bound to kill himself anyhow?" The parrain tells her, "One day. He had to. For our sins" (196). Tee Bob's death bears the same significance as Big Laura's, Joe Pittman's, and Ned Douglass's. His death also makes Miss Jane another witness to the horrific suffering of the people she has loved. She is startled, however, when the parrain tells her that she too is responsible for Tee Bob's failure. "Wait. Me?" she asks. "All right, lets say I'm in there. Where I fit in, I don't know, but let's say I'm in there" (193). Miss Jane fits in because of her silence. All those who know of the rules, as the novel shows, and do nothing to bring about change are helping to maintain the rules.

Tee Bob rejected the rules but had no one on his side to help fight the system. To some extent he was an unacknowledged leader in the Samson community.
Instead of following the leader, the community allows him to destroy himself. In the last section of the novel, Gaines presents Samson with another leader. "Anytime a child is born," says Miss Jane, "the old people look in his face and ask him if he's the One... Maybe they don't say it all the time; maybe they just feel it--but feel it they do" (199).

Jimmy Aaron becomes the "One" for Miss Jane's community. The time is the late forties, forty years after Ned Douglass's death and ten years or so before the civil rights movement. Because he is labeled the "One," Jimmy must be different from the other children in his community. For example, the older blacks do not want him to go to the fair on Saturday nights. "They had music and dancing at these fairs," says Miss Jane, "and that was sinful. "We didn't like for him to listen to the radio, either; 'less he was listening to gospel music on Sundays" (212). Jimmy's people want him to be a preacher because the Master started when He was twelve. It is not Jimmy that the older black characters are really interested in. It is what Jimmy will represent--the church.

Jimmy, moreover, is merely a tangible symbol of hope. This hope, Trudier Harris believes, "has always
been an undercurrent in the writings of black Americans, no matter what part of the country they called home."/7/ Jimmy is a kind of Savior, the search for which began, continues Trudier Harris, "in the days of slavery and continued in each new boy child born in the quarters and the shacks which marked the transition to freedom." It follows, then, that Miss Jane's coterie is relying more upon their Faith and the church to lead them to freedom than they are upon Jimmy, who is just an instrument. "The colored has suffered in this world, Miss Jane says, "and that is true, but we know still the Lord's been good to us" (211).

When Jimmy does get religion, he tells the people that he would work in the church but not be a preacher. What Jimmy wants to do in life actually concerns the gnawing in his chest and shows his identity with Ned Douglass, who also was a good thinker and good hearer of his people's problems. The gnawing also helps us observe Miss Jane's significance in the novel as witness to one more example of the silent suffering of the blacks in her environment. She notices, for example, the seriousness in Jimmy's eyes that she once saw in Ned's eyes.
This seriousness relates to Jimmy's calling as the "One." He leaves Samson to go live with his mother in New Orleans. When he would return on holidays and during the summer, the people would notice his indifference to the church. He tries to interest the black community in the civil rights demonstrations against discriminatory school laws. His marching with the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. teaches him that one individual cannot change the laws of society. It takes a community of people. "I don't go to church no more," he tells the older blacks, "because I lost faith in God. And even now I don't feel worthy standing here before y'all. I don't feel worthy because I'm so weak. And I'm here because you are strong. I need you because my body is not strong enough to stand out there all by myself" (224).

The loss of faith in church reveals the church's apathy toward current, political concerns, an attitude we have seen in much of Gaines's fiction. The church's solution to social problems in the novel is to gather together on termination Sunday, which, says Miss Jane, "is when you tell the church you still carrying the cross and you want meet them 'cross the River Jordan when you die. You start out singing your song" (223).
But Gaines's book shows sympathy for the older black characters who have received permanent psychological and physical scars from their oppressors. Miss Jane informs Jimmy that these scars lead to fear that "is not easily removed. She tells him that he must talk to the people in order to soothe their emotional hurt. "Some of them won't ever listen," she tells him. "Many won't even hear" (229). One of the reasons the people have not responded to Jimmy's speeches is summed in Miss Jane's speech to Jimmy about time and progress.

People and time bring forth leaders. Leaders don't bring forth people. The people and the time brought King; King didn't bring the people. What Miss Rosa Parks did, everybody wanted to do. They just needed one person to do it first because they all couldn't do it at the same time; then they needed King to show them what to do next. But King couldn't do a thing before Miss Rosa Parks refused to give that white man her seat. (228)

Jimmy follows Miss Jane's advice and talks to the people. As a version of Martin Luther King, he persuades most of the people to follow him to Bayonne to drink from the water fountain. Those who do not plan to attend the demonstration evidently are not
On the morning that Miss Jane and several others prepare to go into Bayonne, news arrives that Jimmy has been killed. Robert Samson tries to encourage Jimmy's followers to return to their homes. To Robert, Jimmy's death implies an end to the demonstrations. To the blacks, Jimmy's death represents a beginning. "Just a little piece of him is dead," Miss Jane responds to Robert. "The rest of him is waiting for us in Bayonne. And I will go with Alex" (245).

Miss Jane's decision to go into Bayonne shows her belief in the statement she makes to Jimmy that "people and time bring forth leaders." She becomes another Rosa Parks, and to some extent, another version of Martin Luther King. "Me and Robert looked at each other there a long time, then I went by him" (246). That Robert stares at her suggests Gaines's awareness of the current tension in the world between blacks and whites. Miss Jane's move toward Bayonne suggests a move toward reconciliation. Had Gaines shown Miss Jane drinking from the water fountain, we would think the conflict between past and present and the conflict between the races have been resolved. Her gesture of private defiance successfully leads the brave ones in
the community to continue the process—begun by Big Laura, Joe Pittman, Ned Douglass—of overturning an unexamined tradition. Neither her decision nor her defiance, however, would have been possible without those who have have failed before her. For the most part, she has been a silent observer of the past and present. Her active participation in and continuation of the struggle at the end make her personally mature.

Who are the real victims and non-victims in Miss Jane Pittman? The deaths of Big Laura, Ned Douglass, and Tee Bob, all of whom rebelled against the forces of control, seem to imply that the destructive, dominant white society is invincible. But the hope for social freedom that characters like Tee Bob were striving for is perpetuated by and realized by characters like Miss Jane. The real victims, as Gaines continues to demonstrate in his novels, are not necessarily the blacks or whites who are physically destroyed. The real victims are those who do not have a hope for freedom; the real victims are those who are not courageous enough to participate in the struggle to end oppression; the real victims are those who, like the tragic mulatto, think that the little white or Creole in their blood makes them noble or superior to other
blacks and to some whites; the real victims are those individuals who have convinced themselves that social conditions of the past, which to some extent are seen as laws, are unchangeable in the present. Characters of this opinion believe that struggle does not necessarily mean progress.

At the end of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines moves toward a reconciliation of past and present and of the older and younger generations. The victors are those characters who have fought and who continue to fight to achieve this reconciliation. Miss Jane Pittman presents us with a variety of subjects relating to the struggle for civil rights and social freedom among black, white, and Cajun. The novel shows the dark side of human nature with its bigotry, hatred, and violence. The novel likewise presents a move toward a peaceful resolution of conflict. Hence, Gaines's novel becomes a study in black and white, past and present, young and old in reference to the human condition. In the Gaines's next novel, In My Father's House, these reconciliations appear to be moving further apart, for the efforts of a small, rural black community to gain social equality in the deep South are almost thwarted by the moral blindness and stature of one man.
Notes

1 Ernest J. Gaines, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (New York: Bantam, 1971). Further references to this source will be parenthesized in the text.


3 Lerone Bennett Jr., Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America 5th ed. (New York: Penguin, 1982) 211-212. Bennett's chapter about how the civil war was victorious for blacks is entitled "The Jubilee War: Witnesses and Warriors." Freedom for the slave meant many things: "Freedom to some was getting married . . . and signing papers and knowing that it was for always and not until the next cotton crop. Freedom to others was the right to pick up and go . . . . Freedom was Bibles, freedom was churches, freedom was . . . getting up when you wanted to and lying down when the spirit hit you. It was doing nothing, too."


Chapter V

The Prodigal Father: In My Father's House

In the last section of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines introduces us to committees that investigate the civil rights of minorities. The struggle for social freedom that Big Laura, Joe Pittman, Ned Douglass, and Jimmy Aaron strive for culminates in Miss Jane's decision to go into Bayonne to drink from the water fountain. In Miss Jane Pittman, we see the missing link that has been the inactive force throughout his fiction: the black church. Jimmy Aaron convinces the older blacks like Miss Jane that the younger blacks cannot fight against prejudice and discrimination without the strength and support of the older members in the black community. The blacks who ride to Bayonne with Miss Jane show their willingness to join the struggle for social freedom. Miss Jane becomes the voice of the church, especially since she is the "church mother." The church now functions as a viable institution of society because of its emphasis on civil rights? Before Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines introduces us to committees that investigate the civil rights of minorities. The struggle for social freedom that Big Laura, Joe Pittman, Ned Douglass, and Jimmy Aaron strive for culminates in Miss Jane's decision to go into Bayonne to drink from the water fountain. In Miss Jane Pittman, we see the missing link that has been the inactive force throughout his fiction: the black church. Jimmy Aaron convinces the older blacks like Miss Jane that the younger blacks cannot fight against prejudice and discrimination without the strength and support of the older members in the black community. The blacks who ride to Bayonne with Miss Jane show their willingness to join the struggle for social freedom. Miss Jane becomes the voice of the church, especially since she is the "church mother." The church now functions as a viable institution of society because of its emphasis on civil rights? Before Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines introduces us to committees that investigate the civil rights of minorities. The struggle for social freedom that Big Laura, Joe Pittman, Ned Douglass, and Jimmy Aaron strive for culminates in Miss Jane's decision to go into Bayonne to drink from the water fountain. In Miss Jane Pittman, we see the missing link that has been the inactive force throughout his fiction: the black church. Jimmy Aaron convinces the older blacks like Miss Jane that the younger blacks cannot fight against prejudice and discrimination without the strength and support of the older members in the black community. The blacks who ride to Bayonne with Miss Jane show their willingness to join the struggle for social freedom. Miss Jane becomes the voice of the church, especially since she is the "church mother." The church now functions as a viable institution of society because of its emphasis on civil rights? Before Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines introduces us to committees that investigate the civil rights of minorities. The struggle for social freedom that Big Laura, Joe Pittman, Ned Douglass, and Jimmy Aaron strive for culminates in Miss Jane's decision to go into Bayonne to drink from the water fountain. In Miss Jane Pittman, we see the missing link that has been the inactive force throughout his fiction: the black church. Jimmy Aaron convinces the older blacks like Miss Jane that the younger blacks cannot fight against prejudice and discrimination without the strength and support of the older members in the black community. The blacks who ride to Bayonne with Miss Jane show their willingness to join the struggle for social freedom. Miss Jane becomes the voice of the church, especially since she is the "church mother." The church now functions as a viable institution of society because of its emphasis on civil rights?
Jane Pittman, the church in Gaines's fiction was concerned with the individual's personal salvation only.

In My Father's House (1978) also shows the church as an important institution that attempts to effect social change in a prejudiced society. The novel is about the conflict between a minister and his community. Until the arrival of his illegitimate son, Robert X, Reverend Martin has been devoted not only to his family but also to the civil rights struggle in his community. But when he learns that his son has been picked up by the sheriff for loitering in the community, Martin sacrifices all that the civil rights committee has worked for to get his son out of jail. When the committee votes the minister out as president, they rob him of his pride. Reverend Martin loses his social position in the community, but he gains self-knowledge. He learns that even the best and physically strongest man in the community needs the love and support of his followers in a time of trial. Although Gaines's novel sympathizes with both the committee and Reverend Martin's family, whom he has also turned away from, and with Martin himself, who feels that he must search his past in order to make up for the hurt he has
caused others, the book demonstrates that personal failure is inevitable when one sacrifices the needs of the group for personal concerns.

Much of the change in the St. Adrienne, Louisiana, of Gaines's novel is possible because of the Reverend Phillip Martin, a man of strength, endurance, and power. The minister's name and title identify him with the late Reverend Martin Luther King, for the blacks in St. Adrienne think Reverend Martin is infallible and act as if he were solely responsible for maintaining the struggle against racism. But we learn early in the story that the minister was callow in his youth. His callowness indirectly relates to the sudden appearance of Robert X, who pretends that he is in town for "a black man's conference." The truth is that Robert has come from Chicago to find Phillip, who sent Robert's mother away with the children over twenty years ago. Since then, Robert's family has lived in poverty and sorrow.

Even Robert's physical appearance reveals the sorrow he has known: "He was too thin, too hungry-looking . . . He looked sick. His jaws were too sunken-in for someone his age. His deepset bloodshot eyes wandered too much" (3-4). He compares his life to
an alley "strewn with broken bottles, rusty tin cans, bits of paper, and any other kind of debris imaginable." Used to be something good in them bottles, in them cans," he says to Shepherd Lewis, who has come to take Robert to Phillip's house party. "Somebody went through lot of pain making them bottles round—red and green. Look at them now. Busted. Cans bent and rusted. Nothing but trash. Nothing but trash now" (26-27). Robert, too, used to feel good about himself until he grew up and learned about Phillip Martin, who not long after Robert's mother, Johanna, was sent away, became an influential minister and leader in St. Adrienne. In fact, one of the purposes of the house party is to honor Reverend Martin's influence and leadership in the community.

What the civil rights leader has tried to convince the blacks in St. Adrienne is that social change does not come without action. "It took us years to get Mr. Chenal to hire black people in the first place," the minister tells his listeners at the party. "Now, after he hires them he don't want to pay them nothing. When we go up there Friday we go'n make it clear. Either he pay the black workers the same he pay the whites, or we march before the door" (35). "We" implies those blacks in the community who are ready to follow Phillip.
And many of the blacks, except for the young teachers, are willing to follow the Martin Luther King of St. Adrienne, who is ready to lead up to the moment he first sees Robert X in his home. The minister "looked puzzled, confused, a deep furrow came into his forehead and he raised his hand up to his temple as if he were in pain" (39). Reverend Martin is not in pain but is confused because the present and past suddenly flash before him simultaneously. Moving toward his son, the minister "pushed his way out of the crowd and started across the room. He had taken only two or three steps when he suddenly staggered and fell heavily to the floor" (40). Losing his consciousness for only a few moments, Reverend Martin says to the crowd, "I'm all right. . . . Please let me get up. I have to get up. Don't let me deny him again" (41).

This repetition of denial echoes St. Peter's denial of Jesus, the Christ; Martin now, as Peter did later, feels guilty for having once neglected Robert's family. Suddenly, the minister forgets about the present and concentrates on the past. Even when Reverend Martin goes to his office to think, he finds himself thinking of the boy and asks himself why he did not climb up off the floor and why he let the people
believe he was tired. "Leaders have to clamb off the floor," he says to Elijah Green, the schoolteacher who lives with Reverend Martin's family and teaches the minister's daughter piano lessons. "We can't let others speak for us no more" (58).

Reverend Martin's fall is moral as much as it is physical. The minister's situation is similar to that of tragic characters in Greek literature. The hero of Greek tragedies, as Aristotle defines him, "is a man who is highly renowned and prosperous, but one who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment or frailty."/2/ Reverend Martin at the top of the social hierarchy, for on the evening that the people gather at Reverend Martin's home, the narrator introduces us to the civil rights leader as if he were a stately monarch:

Phillip Martin wore a black pinstriped suit, a light gray shirt, and a red polka-dot tie. He was sixty years old, just over six feet tall, and he weighed around two hundred pounds. His thick black hair and thick well-trimmed mustache were just beginning to show some gray. Phillip was a very handsome dark-brown-skinned man, admired by women, black and white. The black women said it around people they could trust. There were rumors that he was involved with women other than
his wife, but whether these rumors were true or not he was very much respected by most of the people who knew him. And no one even questioned his position as leader of the civil rights movement in the parish. The people had begun to applaud Phillip, and he raised his hands for silence. (34-35)

That the people respect Reverend Martin implies that they trust his judgment in making decisions for the entire black community. That no one even questions his position as leader gives him freedom to use his power as he pleases. For example, when Shepherd brings the news that Sheriff Nolan has picked up Robert X for walking the streets, Reverend Martin's wife suggests that he wait until after the meeting with Chenal to confront Nolan. The minister responds, "I can't just sit back and let them pick up somebody for walking" (80). Reverend Martin's real motive is that he wants to get his son out of jail. When he gets to the sheriff's office, the civil rights leader learns that Nolan wants an unusual price to release Robert. "Don't bother Chenal," Nolan tells the minister. Reverend Martin thinks carefully about the black people who have fought long and hard to stop Chenal but thinks more
strongly about his own bloodline. Realizing that Nolan will not take money, the Martin Luther King of St. Adrienne agrees not to lead the demonstration in front of Chenal's store.

Martin's hamartia, if we continue the classical analogy, is seen partly in the bad decision that he makes before conferring with his committee. In other words, he acts not for the benefit of the group but for self, yet the minister tries to reason with his son that in the past he could not stand against the forces that control him. "I was just some other brutish animal who could cheat, steal, rob, kill— but not stand. . . . I'm a man today. I prayed for Him to make me a man, and He made me a man. I can stand today. I have a voice today" (102). He tells Robert that thirty years ago he did not know how to speak out against the system that made him sexually and socially abuse Johanna.

Not protect you or your mother. They had branded that in us from the time of slavery. That's what kept me on that bed. Not 'cause I didn't want to get up. I wanted to get up more than anything in the world. But I had to break the rules, rules we had lived by for so long, and I wasn't strong enough to break them then. (102)
Martin's decision to sacrifice political and civic concerns for personal issues shows his attempt to exert his own will against the social rules. "I love you now," he tells his son, "and I loved you then. I was too weak then to do anything. Today I have strength. 'Cause today I have God" (100).

But does Martin really have God? In fact, Gaines's book questions whether the minister actually has a voice, especially when we consider the deal he makes with Nolan. It is significant, for example, that the Reverend is unable to pray after his physical fall. "He wanted to pray, he needed to pray, but how could he pray? If he prayed out loud, Elijah would surely hear him; and he could not get satisfaction praying in silence" (54). And still another time, he "knelt down beside his desk to pray. But when he got up off his knees he felt as if he had not prayed at all" (69). Religion does not have the answers to Martin's problems, as when he tries to read the Bible.

But he didn't begin with the Lord's Prayer as he usually did each day, neither did he say any of the things that he had said daily since his conversion. Instead, he asked the same question over and over: 'Why? Why? Why?
Is this punishment for my past? Is that why he's here, to remind me? But I asked forgiveness for my past. And you've forgiven me for my past. ' (69)

It is ironic that Reverend Martin has asked God to forgive him for his past and at the same time tries to make up for the past. The "Why? Why?" is similar to the question Job asks of God in the Old Testament: "Why did I suffer?" What Job learns, and what Phillip Martin will eventually learn, is that "Through suffering ... men learn—not only of their littleness and sinfulness but the positive and creative possibilities of themselves and the world they live in."/3/

After Reverend Martin bonds his son out of jail, the minister takes the boy for a ride and desperately tries to close the gap between him and Robert. But Robert tells Reverend Martin that Johanna and her family had dismissed him from their minds the day he sent them away from Reno. (In fact, the X in Robert's name implies a lack of identity and the absence of a father.) When he realizes that he and Robert cannot communicate, the minister lets Robert out of the car and drives to Reno Plantation to visit his own
godmother. He "stopped the car in front of his godmother's house, but now he was ashamed to go inside. How could he go in there and tell her how he felt? What would she think of him if he went in there and told her what had happened only a few miles away from here? But if he couldn't go to her, where else could he go?" (106).

The minister's going to his godmother suggests another way he tries to make connection with his past, but he learns that there is an impenetrable wall that separates him from all who are associated with the Reno plantation, his past. "It's about time you showed up here," she tells him. "You done forgot I'm still alive, Phillip?" (107) His godmother can tell by his quietness that there is something wrong in St. Adrienne. He cannot confess to her, of course, because she, like Robert and Johanna, represents a part of the past the Reverend has rejected.

When he does not receive a solution from his godmother, Reverend Martin goes home to his wife. By this time, the committee on civil rights has gathered at his home to report on the personal pact the minister has made with sheriff Nolan and is angry because Reverend Martin did not contact the group. "It was
personal, Mills," the Reverend says. "Not political" (122). Jonathan Robillard, Phillip's young assistant pastor, says to the Reverend, "Soon as you involved Chenal it was political" (122). Howard Mills, Martin's deacon, argues, "We all have sons. Every last one of us in here have sons except Jonathan there. Peter got a son in that same jail right now. I'm sure Nolan would let him out this minute, this minute, if all us went up there and told him we wouldn't demonstrate here no more" (122).

Reverend Martin has now separated himself from the present. He has disgraced the black community. Elijah Green, who praised the civil rights leader to Robert X early in the story, goes up to the Congo Room to get drunk. "He was too ashamed to face you," Jonathan tells the pastor. Had Reverend Martin come to the committee before going to the jail, Gaines implies, he would have received guidance and moral support, but his excessive pride stopped him from conferring with the committee. The minister did not want the community of St. Adrienne to know about the sins of his past.

The novel gives us a taste of the minister's pride in his response to the committee:
Yes, I made a mistake. Yes, I shoulda got up off that floor and said who he was. When I didn't do that I shoulda called Mills Saturday night. I shoulda told him about it Sunday morning. Maybe I shoulda called McVay this morning too. These the things I shoulda done--yes, these things I shoulda done. But let's not forget the things I have done in this town, in this parish. (123)

There is a pattern developing here in Reverend Martin's attitude toward sin or wrongdoing. When Martin thought he had displeased God, he tried to rely on his good deeds to put him right with God. Now, the minister expects his good deeds in the community to compensate for wrong he has done to the committee on civil rights. "And do you know for a fact, boy," the Reverend asks Jonathan, "who started the first civil rights organization?" (124). "You did, Reverend," Jonathan says. "You did. But you couldn't do it by yourself. Without the people behind you, them white people out there wouldn'ta heard a thing you were saying. I'm speaking for the people, Reverend. Something you didn't consider this morning" (124).

Although Reverend Martin accuses Jonathan of being envious and ambitious, the committee nods in approval of what Jonathan has said. "I'm president of this
committee," the minister yells to the group. "Me, Not Jonathan. Me" (124). In Gaines's other works in which a unified family or community exists, the focus is on what "we" as a group must do. Martin's emphasis on "I" and "me" breaks this unity.

Martin's use of "I" also suggests that he wants to be solely responsible for the changes in St. Adrienne. "Chenal is just another battle," he tells the committee. "Not the war" (124). "He was my war," Mills responds. "I'm old, I don't have too many more battles left in me. This might be my last one--and I wanted to go out winning. I wanted Chenal" (124). Chenal represents the force or system that has prevented the social progress of blacks in St. Adrienne and the system that has allowed white men to rape black women (125). "No, Chenal ain't just another battle, Phillip," Mills tells him. "It's war. Plain, cold war." What Mills and other older blacks--especially the men--want Chenal to know is that they are not "baboons and apes" or old gray coon. "We men, Chenal, and we 'tend to fight you till we change you or destroy you. We got nothing but our bodies to use for weapons, but we go'n use that till we get what we want. Respect for our women, our children, respect for the dead who couldn't get respect from your paw." (127).
Reverend Martin's decision not to demonstrate at Chenal puts an end to the idea of change and of progress, Gaines seems to be saying. Because of this decision, the committee tells the minister that they have come to his home to vote whether he can remain president of the committee. The unanimous vote that Reverend Phillip J. Martin be removed as president of the St. Adrienne Civil Rights Committee disturbs Martin tremendously and leads him to displace his anger onto Jonathan, who may become the acting president. Martin's response marks the climax of his moral fall. The man who wears "two big rings on his fingers" and a "gold watch band" that sparkles in the light has been dethroned. His ego is wounded because the men who used to applaud him when he entered the room now walk away in shame and disgust.

After the committee members leave, Martin continues to dwell on the idea of having lost respect from the community. "Phillip went back into the kitchen and got one of the bottles of sherry and a glass and went to his office. The bottle had not been opened, and he ripped off the seal and half filled the glass" (132-133). While Reverend Martin no longer feels self-important, he still feels self-righteous.
"I made one mistake," he tells his wife after he has been drinking. "How about all the other things I've done?" Martin returns to his wife in the same manner he has come to the committee, that is, after he has made his own decision. "I didn't come to you because I didn't know how to come to you. I didn't know if you'd understand" (134). "That's how it's always been," she tells him. "You come to me for this bed, for nothing else" (134). The minister has never expected his wife to understand that he has three illegitimate children in the world. He likewise has not expected the committee to understand that he bonded his son out of jail in order to know his name (132).

While Gaines's book may sympathize with Reverend Martin's predicament here, the novel calls our attention to the civil rights leader's distinction between personal and political causes. As Gaines's fiction has already demonstrated, the family and church as institutions often provide the moral strength for the oppressed people who want to change social rules. The minister's leaving out the family and civil rights committee robs him of the forces that can sustain him. In other words, Reverend Martin has no faith in his followers: "I pity little men," he tells his wife
about the committee members. "That's right—little men," she replies. "That's why they did what they did. They know you look at them as little men" (135). "I never told you all my problems because I didn't want you worrying every time I left the house," he tries to explain. "That's not why you never included me," she contends. "You never included me because you wanted to do it all yourself" (136).

It seems that Martin wants to maintain leadership in order to label himself as a good person. To him, his work in the church and community compensates for his corrupt past, as we see in his wife's description of him.

Ever since I met you, Phillip, you been running, running, and running. Away from what, Phillip? Trying to make up for what, Phillip? For what you did to that boy? For what you did to his mon? For other things you did in the past? The past is the past, Phillip. You can't make up for the past. There ain't nothing you go'n find out in Baton Rouge. Nothing Mr. Chippo can tell you. (136)

In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, Gaines explains what happens to characters who try to make up for the past:
There is a difference between living in the past and trying to escape it. If you do nothing but worship the past you are quite dead, I believe. But if you start running and trying to get away from the past, you will, I think eventually run yourself out of whatever it does to you. It will run you mad, or kill you in some way or the other. So you really don't get away. It's there, and you live it.\footnote{164}

Chippo Simon, an old friend of the minister, saw Johanna, Martin's old girlfriend, out in California approximately six weeks before Robert X's arrival. Reverend Martin believes that Chippo can tell him something about Robert and Johanna. In other words, Martin believes that Chippo is his last opportunity to seal the past. "Long as you don't say stay away from Baton Rouge," he warns his wife, "'Cause I'm going to Baton Rouge. When I come back I'll make it up to you, if I have to start from scratch" (137). What we have here is the minister's further attempt to correct his failures.

Against his wife's earnest plea, Martin defiantly goes to Baton Rouge in search of the past. One of the first persons he meets is the Reverend Peters, who talks to the civil rights leader about faith. After
Reverend Martin mentions that he is looking for his son, Peters says to him, "He [God] will bring him back to you if you have faith" (153). Martin is convinced, however, that there is a gap between fathers and sons that not even God can close" (154). Phillip Martin wants fathers and sons together now. The irony, of course, is that Martin has just left his son in St. Adrienne.

Another person Martin meets as he looks for Chippo is a young rebel named Billy, who is angry because the blacks in Baton Rouge are doing nothing about a young boy who was killed sitting in his own home eating dinner. Billy wants to plan a "One day" war, and he has been organizing a guerilla army to help destroy Western Civilization. "Burn it down, you destroy Western Civilization," he says to Phillip. "You put the world back right—let it start all over again" (162). Billy's major problem is that he, like Martin, is acting alone to try to bring about change. Reverend Peters tells Phillip that the gap between fathers and sons can be closed only with time. Phillip likewise tells Billy that social freedom also comes with time. Billy believes that now is the time to act: "If it happen, we pick up guns, we pick up our torches, and we hit back" (164).
Billy and Reverend Martin are similar in that both blame the world for their failures. Martin learns, for example, that he is not the only father separated from a son. Billy describes the relationship between himself and his father as average. "How do we close the gap, Billy?" the minister asks. When asked if the church has done anything to close the gap, Billy responds, "There ain't nothing in the churches but more separation. Every little church got they own little crowd, like gangs out on the street. They all got to outdo the other one. Don't look for that crowd to close no gap" (155).

Neither Billy nor the Reverend is aware of the significance of the group and the family, Gaines implies. "My daddy got to catch up with me," Billy says. "I can't go back where he is at" (166). Billy's error is that he is not willing to join forces with society. Martin's situation is similar in that he is trying to go back to Robert's past in order to catch up. Neither Billy nor Phillip understands the real problem. "Then what will close the gap between you and your daddy," Martin asks Billy, "between me and my boy?" (166). The solution lies not in what, necessarily, but in who, Gaines seems to be saying.
Civil Rights movements, Gaines intimates, are methods of bringing about change. The people in the organization and individual members of the family are the real strength and are the ones who can close the gap.

Still hoping to find a way to close the gap, the Reverend continues his search for Chippo Simon. "I'm at war with myself," Martin tells a woman at a bar. "I'm at war with my soul. For the past few days I've been questioning myself. I come up with nothing but doubts—about everything" (178). Martin believes that the information that he receives from Chippo about Johanna and the other children will soothe the moaning deep in his chest. However, when he does talk with Chippo, the information Chippo reveals puts a heavier burden on Martin's chest. Chippo speaks, for example, of the rape of Johanna's daughter and of Johanna's younger boy's murdering the rapist and going to jail for five years. The minister learns why Robert X, whose real name is Etienne, is at war with his own soul.

Chippo tells Reverend Martin that after Justine's rape, Robert, the older brother, and Antoine argued about going after the rapist. Robert told Antoine to
let the law take care of the crime. Antoine went after the rapist anyway and shot him down. Antoine's revenging his sister's honor brought them closer, especially after he was put in jail. These two also separated themselves from Robert and Johanna. Not long after Antoine was put in jail, Robert began locking himself inside his room. "He wasn't the man of the house no more," says Chippo to Reverend Martin, and Robert "didn't want act like he was."

Robert has locked himself in his room because of his guilt, and, like his father, has been trying to find ways to compensate for past failures. What is more, Robert's coming to St. Adrienne more clearly identifies him with Reverend Martin. Both are in search of answers. When Robert does get in touch with his past, that is, meets up with the minister, he no longer has the desire to kill the father, because to do so is to try to terminate an indestructible past.

Martin likewise is reaching into the past. Chippo tells him, "What's been done been done, man. A terrible thing happened, yes; but you can't do a thing 'bout it. My honest opinion--forget it" (201). Still, the Reverend believes that fathers and sons will come together. At this point in the conversation, Shepherd
and Reverend Martin's wife enter the room with the news of Robert's death. "Today at three o'clock," says Shepherd, "Alcee Lejan saw him standing on that trestle over Big Man Bayou... Nolan and his deputies pulled him out of the water" (203).

Robert's death substantiates Gaines's statement that characters who run away from the past either go mad or are killed in some way or other. We can also infer that the gap between fathers and sons may never be closed. After hearing of his son's death, Reverend Martin loses all rational power. "You work, you work," he says in front of Shepherd and Beverly. "What good it do? You bust your ass--what good it do? Man and God, both in one day, tell you go to hell, go fuck yourself" (207). While Robert's search leads to death, Phillip Martin's search leads to mental imbalance, even to the extent that he wants to fight Chippo and Simon.

The minister's cursing God again identifies him with Job, who curses the day of his birth after discovering that his family and possessions have been wiped out. Martin also continues to cling to his righteousness and outlines his good works he has wrought in St. Adrienne, and like Job, tries to justify the ways of God to man. Job's wife tells him to curse
God and die. No one tells Phillip Martin to curse God, however. His excessive pride makes him say, "Don't put no faith in nothing. Not in God. Not in work. Not in love. In nothing. Put it in the bottle. That's a good place to put your faith" (210). Martin has not only failed his family and community, but he has also failed God, Gaines implies. "You wanted too much, Reverend," says Beverly. "You wanted too much from man, from God. Too much all at one time" (211). The civil rights leader thinks he can make up for the past in one day and that he can force his love onto his son. As a result, he is hurt beyond endurance.

The lesson that Phillip Martin must learn is similar to Job's. Richard B. Sewall contends that the main movement of Job's experience is "from the morbid concern for his own suffering toward membership and partisanship in the human family."  The concern for self is what makes Martin concentrate on the past and Robert. "Once He made me a human being He owed me my son," says the minister about God. "You wanted the past changed," Beverly says to the Reverend again. "Even He can't do that. So that leaves nothing but the future. We work toward the future" (213).
Because Reverend Martin wanted to change the past, of which Robert is a part, the son's death becomes a necessary sacrifice to make Phillip Martin work in the present and toward the future. Martin tells his wife at the end of the novel, "I'm lost, Alma. I'm lost." She says to him, "We just go' n have to start again" (214). "We" suggests unity that is needed to bind the family in love. Reverend Martin can start over again, Gaines implies, because there is no longer a past from which to run away. The minister has emptied himself of self-righteousness. Martin's physical loss, his son, will lead to moral strength. The minister, who has been brought face to face with the callowness of his youth, is forced to admit that he must humble himself before God and man if he wants to be exalted. In due time, that is, Martin may be able to reunite with the civil rights committee. This time, however, he may be inclined to serve the group instead of self.
Notes


5. Sewall 360.
Chapter VI

"The Trumpet of Conscience":
A Gathering of Old Men

Upon a first reading of Ernest Gaines's works, one would think his novels concern blacks only. When one examines the novels more carefully, one learns that Gaines's novels are about Southern race-relations—black, white, and Cajun. Each novel is about people who are trying to respond to the limitations imposed upon them by external and internal forces of society; in each novel, the characters attempt to know who they are in a society that robs them of an individual consciousness. In each novel, moreover, the characters are trying to understand their relations to other men and to the universe.

Gaines's characters—especially his black characters—are dissatisfied with the indignities of segregation and with the horrors of racial and social injustice that have been discriminatorily practiced and ingrained in American society—particularly the Southern society—since slavery. One of the questions that Gaines's novels raise is how can the characters
speed up this stride toward social freedom before the
characters lose the will to seek self-identity and the
human right as well as civil right to be free.

The answer, as Miss Jane Pittman and In My
Father's House have demonstrated, lies in the
community. In both novels, the characters must steel
themselves as a group against the forces of oppression
while making the stride toward social equality. This
sense of communal spirit is also seen in Gaines's sixth
about the conflict between opposing races. The
thoughtless hatred and racism of whites has continued
from generation to generation on a sugar plantation
near the Bayonne, Louisiana, of Gaines's novel. When
the older black men and women challenge the dominant,
white society, the blacks not only threaten the whites,
but also place whites in opposing positions. Gaines's
book sympathizes with both races, but it demonstrates
that social change can occur only if the blacks put
their fears behind them and stand as a racial group,
not just against whites but against the practices and
ideologies that leaders of that race have formulated to
perpetuate oppression. Gaines's book also demonstrates
a point Trudier Harris makes about Alice Walker's
Meridian: "The future in the South is possible only through constant vigilance."/2/

When *A Gathering of Old Men* opens, a white man named Beau Boutan has been shot on a sugarcane plantation near a black man's house. Candy, a white woman who was reared by a black family, sends for all old black men, some of whom live ten or twenty miles away, to bring their shotguns to Mathu's place. She does not say why they should come but requests that each man fire his gun before leaving home. That Gaines uses a white woman to unite blacks suggests that the reciprocal hatred of black and white may slowly be healing.

When Candy's message reaches Chimley, one of the old black men, he says to Mat, his friend, "I had never knowed in all my life where a black man had killed a white man in this parish. I had knowed about fights, about threats, but not killings. And now I was thinking about what happened after these fights, these threats, how the white folk rode" (28-29). Chimley and Mat represent all the old blacks in the novel who are afraid of the dominant, white society. These men know that as soon as Beau's family and friends hear of his death, many blacks will suffer regardless of who was responsible.
But Mat responds to Chimley, "I'm too old to go crawling under that bed. I just don't have the strength for it no more. It's too low" (31). Both men finally admit that they are too old to continue hiding behind their fears. They recognize that this may be their last chance to demonstrate bravery. Chimley demonstrates his courage already when he reproves his wife for meddling.

"What's the matter with you, old man? What you doing shooting out that window, raising all that racket for?"
"Right now, I don't know what I'm doing all this for," he told her. "But, see, if I come back from Marshall and them fishes ain't done and ready for me to eat, I'm go'n do me some more shooting around this house. Do you hear what I'm saying?" (33)

Chimley is beginning to like the idea of demonstrating his manhood. Even Mat takes a defiant approach toward his wife when she asks, "What's all this about shotguns?" Mat's wife believes that the old men are old fools and are all gone crazy. "Go somewhere and sit down, woman," Mat tells her. "This men business" (36). Mat looks at and talks to his wife but is not really conscious of her presence:
My chest started heaving, heaving, just heaving. Like I had been running up a hill, a steep hill, and now I had reached the top. I looked at that woman I had been living with all these years like I didn't even know who she was. My chest heaving, and me just looking at her like I didn't even know who she was. Something in my face made her back from me. She kept backing back, backing back, till she had touched the wall. I kept looking at her like I didn't know who she was. My chest heaving, just heaving. (37)

Mat Brown's chest feels heavy because he is preparing to take on a new identity, one which his wife cannot immediately comprehend. He explains to her that it is now time to reap the benefits of a past for which he has already struggled:

All these years we been living together, woman, you still don't know what's the matter with me? The years we done struggle in George Medlow's field, making him richer and richer and us getting poorer and poorer—and you still don't know what's the matter with me? The years I done stood out in that back yard and cussed at God, the years I done stood out on that front garry and beat you for no reason at all—and, woman, you still don't know what's the matter with me?... How they let him die in the hospital just 'cause he was black. No doctor to serve him, let him bleed to death, 'cause he was black. And you ask me what's the matter with me? (37-38)
The repetition of Mat Brown's question to his wife reveals the intensity of the husband's pain, which he has repressed all these years. God "works in mysterious ways," he tells his wife. "Give a old nigger like me one more chance to do something with his life. He gived me that chance, and I'm taking it, I'm going to Marshall. Even if I have to die at Marshall" (38).

Determined to make use of this last opportunity, Mat, Chimley, and several others begin the walk to Mathu's house. On the way, they stop near a graveyard, a place filled with blacks who have been victims of white supremacy and hatred. Mat and his friends have witnessed murders, hangings, and rapes in their families but have remained silent out of fear. The visit to the graveyard becomes more than a memorial, or expression of respect. These men now have the approval and respect of the dead. "Your people will be proud of you, Dirty Red," Cherry says. The stop at the graveyard implies that Gaines's old men are leaving fear behind and are taking on hope, strength, and courage. Jacob, for example, goes over to his sister's grave and pulls up the weeds. His sister was a mulatto "who messed around with the white man and the black
man. The white men wanted her all for themself, and they told her to stay away from the niggers. But she didn't listen, and they killed her" (45). Jacob remembers how the whites abused his sister, and he is present "to make up for what he had done his sister over thirty years ago" (45).

In fact, each of the old men with guns demonstrates his desire to do something for those who have sacrificed their lives in one way or another. Despite the fact that some of them cannot "hit the broad side of a barn with a cannon," each of the men, along with Candy, is ready to say to the sheriff, "I killed him." And because all of them are ready to declare the same thing, regardless of the consequences, Gaines intimates, they are standing collectively against a tradition that has robbed blacks of their individuality. The wall that they line up against becomes more than a wall of boards. It suggests the men's determination and unity and implies that because they are standing together, no one—not even the sheriff or the white Boutans—can push them down.

When sheriff Mapes does arrive on Mathu's place, the men recount their oral narratives about whites' mistreatment of blacks in the past. Candy, however, is
the first to tell Mapes that she killed Beau Boutan. Beau "still lived in the past," she declares to Mapes. "He thought he could beat people like his paw did thirty, forty years ago. He started beating Charlie back there in the field. . . . You just don't beat people with a stalk of cane and hunt them like they're some kind of wild animal" (66). Candy's testimony, as well as those to follow, is authentic not necessarily because it happened, but because it could have happened and has happened to many blacks. "Thirty, forty years ago" refers to a tradition of oppression. The characters' rebellion, then, is against the dominant, white society that perpetuates tradition.

"I killed him," Candy tells Mapes again. Not believing her and suspecting that she is responsible for the gathering, Mapes asks his deputy to bring one of the old men to the front for questioning. The deputy picks Uncle Billy from the crowd. "How come you so far from home, Uncle Billy?" Mapes asks him. "I kilt him," Uncle Billy responds. When Billy answers the same thing the second time, Mapes slaps him across the face and causes spit to shoot from the old man's mouth. Mapes is reverting to an action that was quite common among white slave masters. He inflicts physical
punishment on the old men to cause psychological and emotional fear. By slapping one or two of the blacks down, Mapes hopes to frighten the others into a confession.

These old men, however, are ready for whatever tricks Mapes has, for none of the men moves at Mape's command. "I kilt him," Uncle Billy repeats. "His lips were swollen from where Mapes had hit him. Uncle Billy, explains the narrator, seems as proud of his swollen lips as was Crane's boy of his wound in The Red Badge of Courage" (77). The slaps become a token of victory and show that Uncle Billy takes his humiliation with pride as he repeats a third time, "But I did it." Did he? Even as he talks, Uncle Billy can barely hold the gun in his hand. It matters not whether Uncle Billy has shot Beau. The issue is that Uncle Billy, like Candy, could have committed the murder because of what the whites did to the old man's boy several years ago.

What they did my boy. The way they beat him. They beat him till they beat him crazy, and we had to send him to Jackson. He don't even know me and his mama no more. We take him candy, we take him cake, he eat it like a hog eating corn. Don't offer none to them other crazy people. Don't offer none to nobody--
me, his mama, or them other crazy people. Just put his head in the cake and eat it like a hog eating corn. His mama slice him a little piece and hand it to him, he let it fall on the table, and eat it like a hog eating corn. That's no way to be. It hurt his mama every time she sees that. (80)

The repetition of "eat it like a hog eating corn" suggests not only the severity of the son's state but also the intensity of hurt and pain the parents have repeatedly suffered. Because of this suffering, Uncle Billy is standing with the group to protest against a society that robs an individual of the ability to recognize his existence as a human being.

Mapes maintains that Uncle Billy is holding a grudge against whites, but Uncle Billy actually is taking a stand for social justice. When Mapes realizes that Uncle Billy does not plan to change his mind, the sheriff calls forth another old man—Mathu. "Mapes was a lot of things," says one of the multiple narrators of the novel. "He was big, mean, brutal. But Mapes respected a man. Mathu was a man, and Mapes respected Mathu. But he didn't think much of the rest of us" (84). Mapes feels that Mathu is the only black man in the community brave enough to shoot a white man and tries to urge Mathu to convince the other men to go
home. "You're the only one around here man enough," he says to Mathu. "But I have to hear it from one of them. One of them must say he was called here after it happened" (85). "I can't make nobody say what they don't want to say," Mathu tells him. "A man got to do what he think is right, sheriff. That's what part him from a boy" (85).

At this point in Mathu's speech, several old men gather around Mapes to confirm what Mathu has spoken. "I see," Mapes proclaims. Mapes' response causes Johnny Paul to launch into a history about seeing and not seeing. Letting his eyes survey the quarters where his mama and papa used to stay, Johnny Paul looks at Mapes and says, "No, you don't see." Johnny Paul is looking for the house his parents used to live in, but "it had gone like all the others had gone. Now weeds covered the place where the house used to be" (88). "Y'all look," he asks the blacks. "Y'all see anything? What y'all see?" (88).

Mapes sarcastically interjects, "I see nothing but weeds." The sheriff's vision is external. He cannot see what the blacks who are gathered have seen but "don't see" anymore. This idea of perception is similar to Ralph Ellison's concept of invisibility.
"I'm invisible," says the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, "understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3). The vision of these black characters is internal because they are all looking upon the same reality, the dead relatives who have suffered abuse from the dominant society. Mapes's saying that he sees weeds reveals his lack of sympathy for blacks' situation. "Yes, sir, what you see is the weeds," Johnny Paul tells Mapes, "but you don't see what we don't see." "Do you see it?" Mapes asks Johnny Paul. "No, I don't see it," the old man responds. "That's why I kilt him" (89).

What is it that Johnny Paul and the others see but "don't see"? They are looking for "Mama, Papa, Aunt Clara, Aunt Sarah, Uncle Moon, Aunt Spoodle, [and] Aunt Thread" who used to sit out on the garry" (90). These black characters are looking for the flowers that used to open up at four o'clock. "That's why I kilt him, that's why," repeats Johnny Paul to Mapes. "To protect them little flowers. But they ain't here no more. And how come? "Cause Jack ain't here no more. He's back there under them trees with all the rest" (90-91). Johnny Paul goes on to say that Mapes cannot see these things because he has never wanted to. "But I was here
then," Johnny Paul continues, "and I don't see it now, and that's why I did it for them back there under them trees" (92).

Johnny Paul and Uncle Billy, along with the other blacks present, are witnesses of a hostile past. To these characters, Beau Boutan is an extension of this past. Each of the men who claim to have shot Beau is actually attacking a tradition of Beau Boutans. The next person to attack this tradition is old man Tucker, who lives eight miles from Mathu's place and has not lived on Marshall Plantation in twenty years. Tucker refers to the gathering of old men as "the day of reckoning." "I will speak the truth," he tells Mapes, "without fear, if it mean I have to spend the rest of my life in jail" (96). The truth, continues Tucker, is that "our own black people had been working this land a hundred years for the Marshall Plantation, but when it come to a sharecropping, now they give the best land to the Cajuns, who had never set foot on the land before."/3/ Tucker also talks about what the whites did to his brother Silas and how he did nothing to stop them.

Silas and a white man were racing down the field, Silas on his mule and the white man on the tractor;
Silas and the mule won. "But they wasn't supposed to win," says Tucker. "How can flesh and blood and nigger win against white man and machine?" (96). Gaines's emphasis on machinery is similar to Mark Twain's devastating satire on the mechanical age in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. In Twain's book, the Yankee's know-how is eventually defeated by circumstances. "The dark vision of human incapacity or failure" becomes a major theme in the novel. Gaines's characters in A Gathering of Old Men likewise are at the mercy of chance and mischance.

Tucker's brother was the "last one to fight against that tractor out there," says Tucker to the crowd." Out of fear, Tucker went along with the law's verdict that Silas "cut in on the tractor, and that he [Silas] was the one who started the fight" (97). Tucker goes on the state how he did nothing but stand and watch the whites beat his brother to death. "We had all done the same thing sometime or another; we had all seen our brother, sister, mama, daddy insulted once and didn't do a thing about it" (97). On this "day of reckoning," Tucker asks Silas to forgive him. "Forgive this nothing" (97).
Tucker's confession releases him from fear, which he says, "Done spoiled my intrance... I don't know how come I'm still alive" (98). Because he now stands up against the law, Tucker, along with the other old men, is heroically commanding his own destiny. The next old man to demonstrate a sense of control is Yank, who used to break horses. "They ain't got no more horses to break no more," Yank yells to the crowd. "The tractors, the cane cutters—and I ain't been nothing ever since. They look at you today and they call you trifling, 'cause they see you sitting there all the time not doing nothing. They can't remember when you used to break all the horses and break all the mules" (99).

When the whites stopped Yank Brown from breaking horses, they also robbed him of a part of his manhood, just as the whites did Joe Pittman. The horses made Yank feel secure and added meaning to his life. When the tractors took over, Yank was left at the mercy of his oppressor. "You ever heard of progress?" Mapes asks Yank. The old man says to the sheriff, "I ain't thinking 'bout no progress. I'm thinking 'bout breaking horses" (99). The sheriff goes on to insist that Yank could not break horses any more if his life
depended on it. "Maybe I can't break no more horses,"
Yank tells him. "Maybe that's why I shot the man who
took the horse from me" (99).

Yank is making a reference to Beau Boutan, who was
not born when Yank used to break horses but who
represents those who took the horse from Yank and those
who took away Yank's pride. On his "day of
reckoning," Yank regains his identity. For example,
after Yank repeatedly talks smart to Mapes, the sheriff
tells the deputy to "remember that for the records."
As the deputy is writing down Yank's name, Yank yells
out, "Sylvester J. Battley. Be sure and spell
Sylvester and Battley right, if you can. When my folks
read about me up North, I want them to be proud" (99).

When Yank is finished speaking, Gable, who hardly
ever comes to Marshall Plantation, proudly comes up and
begins his narrative about how he let the whites put
his retarded son in the electric chair.

He wasn't but sixteen years old, half out of
his mind, still they put him in the 'lectric
chair on the word of a poor white trash.
They knowed what kind of gal she was. Knowed
she had messed around with every man, black
and white, on that river. But they put him
in that chair 'cause she said he raped her.
Even if he did, he was still no more than
sixteen years old, and they knowed he was
half out his mind. (100-101)
Gable's narrative reveals man's inhumane treatment of human beings. The electric chair, like the tractor, is a component of the mechanical age and shows the characters' inability to control their destinies against a brutal society. The chair is also a modern, sophisticated substitute for lynching blacks. "Some went so far to say my boy shoulda been glad he died in the 'lectric chair 'stead at the end of a rope. They said at least he was treated like a white man. And it was best we just forget all about it and him" (102). But Gable does not forget. "It's been over forty years now," he explains, "every day of my life, every night of my life, I go through that rainy day again" (102). Gable's rainy day has come to an end because he speaks out against social injustice. "And that's why I kilt Beau, Mr. Sheriff. He was just like that trashy white gal. He was just like them who threwed my be in that 'lectric chair and pulled that switch. No, he wasn't born yet, but the same blood run in all their vein" (102).

Coot, the next old man to speak, also believes that Beau has tainted blood in his veins. Coot is
wearing the army uniform that the whites stopped him from wearing after World War I. "The first white man I met," Coot recounts, "told me I better not ever wear that uniform or that medal again no matter how long I lived. He told me I was back home now, and they didn't cotton to no nigger wearing medals for killing white folks" (104).

Coot's wearing his uniform on this "day of reckoning" signifies courage. His reason for shooting Beau is that Beau wanted him to take off the uniform. Beau represents, for Coot, the society that has robbed him of his honor. Coot puts his uniform on again to restore this lost honor. "The uniform was all wrinkled and full of holes, but Coot wore it like it was something brand new. He even had on the cap, and the medal" (103).

In fact, Gaines's book applauds all the old men for their acts of defiance against a hostile society. But these men are not standing alone. Beginning with Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines demonstrates the essential role of his female characters in helping to effect social change. Women are also significant in A Gathering of Old Men. The wives of the old men speak out against the injustice that the dominant, white
society has inflicted onto blacks. "I can tell you things done happened to women round here make your hair stand on your head," says Beulah to Mapes. After Beulah finishes, Corrine begins speaking of the time blacks used to fish, wash clothes, and be baptized on the St. Charles River. "No more," she says to Mapes. "They took it. Can't go there no more" (107). Mapes's counterargument is that not even he or the Boutans can hunt or fish on the river anymore. He believes that Fix Boutan is as much a victim of time as the blacks are.

Although Gaines's book sympathizes with Mapes's point of view, it demonstrates once more Mapes's limited perception of blacks' situation. Corrine refers to a specific time in history when the Boutans were partly responsible for the social injustice against blacks. Fix "was on that river at one time," interrupts Beulah. "And he sure did his share of dirt while he was there. Like drowning them two little children up the road" (108). Even though Beulah and Corrine are referring to the times of the past, they let Mapes know that the seeds of hatred and prejudice live on in younger whites like Beau. "Things ain't changed that much round here," Beulah continues. "In
them demonstrations, somebody was always coming up missing. So let's don't be putting it all on no thirty-five, forty, fifty years ago like everything is so nicey-nicey now" (108).

Proof that the seed of prejudice and racism is still present in Bayonne is evident in the Boutans' reaction to Beau's death. In fact, one of the reasons Mapes has been anxious to break the gathering of Candy's followers is his fear that Fix Boutan's group off the river will come ready for a lynching. Fix's younger son is the first to demonstrate that the seed of hatred is still present. At Louisiana State University, Gil Boutan is a friend to a black named Cal. The two work so well together on the football team that the fans call them salt and pepper. When Gil receives the news, however, of his brother's violent death, he forgets, for a few moments, his close relationship to Cal. Sully, one of the multiple narrators in the novel and a friend to Gil and Cal, describes his surprise at Gil's behavior.

Gil went on shaking his head like he might start crying. I held on to one of his arms, and Cal was patting him on the back to console him. Then suddenly he just turned against Cal. Out of the blue, he looked at
Gil's sudden hostility confirms the statement Gable makes earlier to Mapes about Beau, who "was just like them who threw my boy in that 'lectric chair and pulled that switch. No, he wasn't born yet, but the same blood run in all their vein" (102). This same blood runs in Gil's veins, but he has tried to empty himself of prejudice and hatred toward blacks. "We're all made of the same bone, the same blood, the same skin," he tells Candy after talking to Mapes. Gil is another example in which Gaines's book shows the process of blacks and whites developing social ties. Gil believes that all individuals should be treated equally. "Won't it ever stop?" he screams to the men and women around him. "I do all I can to stop it. Every day of my life, I do all I can to stop it. Won't it ever stop?" (122).

While Gil's and Cal's attempts to integrate the races are worthy of applause, it will take more than "salt and pepper" to heal the wounds of blacks. How then can racism be eradicated? What Gaines implies is that in order for prejudice to be eradicated, an
individual must have a change of mind or of heart about his relationship to society. It is this change that Gil tries to effect in his father's attitude toward the old men on Marshall Plantation. These old men have been hurt and wait, says Gil, "not for you, Papa—what you're supposed to represent" (137).

Fix Boutan is a symbol of hatred, and his wanting to go Marshall's to take the law in his own hands confirms Gil's contention. "What about your brother, Gi-bear?" Fix asks. "I loved my brother," Gil tells him. "He was much older than me, but we were very close. He taught me everything I know about fishing and hunting... But Beau is dead. Nothing we can do will bring him back" (138). To Gil, Beau's death means the death of whites riding in white hoods. "Those days are gone," he tells his papa. "Those days when you just take the law in your own hands—those days are gone... People died—people we knew—died to change those things" (143).

Fix struggles hard to understand why his sons do not want to defend their brother's honor. "They say my ideas are all past," he says about Jean and Gil. "They say to love family, to defend family honor, is all past. What is left? All my life, that is all I found
worthwhile living for. My family. My family. No, there's only one place left to go now, to the cemetery there in Bayonne—Beau and me beside Matilde" (146).

At Gil's request, Fix Boutan decides not to go into Bayonne. "If the majority feels their brother is not worth it," Fix says out aloud, "then the family has spoken" (145). Although Fix speaks about family, he tells Gil and Jean to get out of his house—forever. As we have seen throughout Gaines's fiction, the family is significant only when the individuals are working together to serve one another. When the individual tries to serve self, the group falls apart. Fix's desire that the family go to Marshall Plantation is self-directed. Gil and Jean's suggestion, however, to let the law handle the matter shows their concern for both groups of old men—those on Marshall Plantation and those on the river.

It is the sons' special concern for blacks that brings about their alienation from the family. Gil and Jean's idea of justice differs widely from the father's perception of justice. The sons become victims because they are indirectly helping to effect social change. But an old friend of the family tries to help Gil understand the relationship between past and future.
"Sometimes you got to hurt something to help something," says Russ to Gil. "Sometimes you have to plow under one thing in order for something else to grow. . . . You can help this country tomorrow. "You can help yourself" (151).

Fix unknowingly is a victim of change that is forced upon him. Should Fix ride into Bayonne, for example, the old idea of justice—which includes lynching—remains the same. That Fix does not leave the river suggests hope for stronger ties between the two races. The sacrifice that is forced upon Fix is his idea of preserving dead honor, which Beau's death represents.

A loss is also forced upon Gil and Jean. They are losing a father, along with the other members of the family. "The people in the other room had already heard what had happened, and they were not looking at Gil the way they did when he first came there. They gave him plenty of room to pass this time" (148). These people as well as Fix are against change and against yielding to the law. Yet their not yielding to the law differs from the defiance of the old men in Bayonne. To the men in Bayonne, the law represents a force that defines their individuality and that keeps
them in the mentality of a slave. In other words, these old men can discern no difference between what Mapes represents and what Fix represents.

When they learn, however, that Fix does not plan to come, they still must decide whether to let Mathu go with Mapes. Half of the old men contend that their purpose has been fulfilled. They have come to fight Fix, but he does not show up. The other half believe that their purpose will not have been fulfilled if Mapes takes Mathu to jail. This latter group thinks that the struggle should continue all the way into the courtroom.

Like Miss Jane Pittman, A Gathering of Old Men shows Gaines's interest in the process of overcoming the past. Miss Jane does not drink from the water fountain. She is just one of many contributors to a social cause. The old, black men in A Gathering of Old Men likewise are engaged in the process of overcoming oppression. That these men gather against the forces that have determined their destinies demonstrates the beginning of this process, for the "trumpet of conscience" has been sounded. "There ain't no more to prove," Mathu says to his people. "Y'all done already proved it" (181). The gathering of these men to protect one individual confirms Mathu's point.
"Till a few minutes ago, I felt the same way that man out there feel about y'all," says Rooster to the group, "you never would 'mount to anything. But I was wrong. And he's still wrong. 'Cause he ain't go'n ever face the fact. But now I know. And I thank y'all. And I look up to you. Every man in here. And this the proudest day of my life" (181). The emphasis on standing like men is pivotal. Before the gathering, these men have hidden in fear from their oppressors, from the enemy. Rooster, for example, confesses that he used to be afraid of Mathu:

I had been looking down at the floor. Now I looked up at Mathu. . . . Used to call me Little Rooster all the time. People even said him and Beulah had fooled around some behind my back. I never asked him, I never asked her--I was too scared. But I wasn't scared now. He knowed I wasn't scared now. That's why he was smiling at me. And that made me feel good. (181)

Even Mathu admits that he himself is now a changed man because of this special gathering. He says that he used to be "a mean-hearted old man . . . till this hour. . . . I been changed. Not by that white man's God. I don't believe in that white man's God. I been changed by y'all. Rooster, Clabber, Dirty Red, Coot--
you changed this hardhearted old man" (182). The change that we see in these old men toward fear and hatred occurs because of their new sense of racial pride. Each of them feels proud for having been ready to suffer the consequences of rebellion. Mathu commends them for their courage yet asks them to go home. In other words, their being willing to fight already makes them victorious.

But the whole idea of standing and showing courage would be fruitless had not the real culprit come forth at the end. Charlie, who has been in the kitchen listening to the old men's deliberations, comes in and asks that someone send outside for Mapes. Charlie's confession becomes one of the crucial lines in the novel: "I'm a man. I want the world to know it. I ain't Big Charlie, nigger boy, no more, I'm a man. Y'all hear me? A man come back. Not no nigger boy. A nigger boy run and run. But a man come back. I'm a man" (187). Although Charlie's speech is the real story, the narratives of the old men and women have verisimilitude because the facts of each narrative are related—whether they are occurring now or occurred forty years ago. In other words, Charlie's story, as we see in the following confession, makes the other narratives authentic:
It didn't start back there in the field, Sheriff. It started fifty years ago. No, not fifty; more like forty-four, forty-five years ago. 'Cause that was about the first time I run from somebody. I'm fifty now, and I'm sure I musta run when I was no more than five, 'cause I know Parrain was beating me for running when I was six. 'Cause I can remember the first time he beat me for running. You remember the first time you beat me for running, Parrain? That time Ed-de took my 'tato on my way to school? (188-189)

Charlie goes on to discuss how whites and blacks have abused him and how his parrain has tried to make him a man. He also tells why he shot Beau. "He cussed me," Charlie says to Mapes. "I was doing my work good. Cussed me anyhow. . . . He told me he wouldn't just cuss me, but he would be at me, too. I told him no, I wasn't go'n 'low that no more, 'cause I was fifty years old-half a hundred" (190). (We learn, too, in Charlie's narrative that Mathu gave him the gun and made him shoot Beau. Charlie asked Mathu to take the blame, knowing that Candy would protect Mathu.) When his narrative is finished, Charlie announces that he is ready to go with the sheriff. "I'm ready to pay," he tells the crowd. "I done dropped a heavy load. Now I know I'm a man" (193).
Charlie submits to the law not because he fears Mapes, but because it is the appropriate thing for a man to do. And Mapes' calling Charlie "Mr. Biggs" is proof of the sheriff's respect for men like Charlie and Mathu. "Y'all heard that?" Charlie asks the people. "Mr. Biggs. Y'all heard him, huh? Now y'all go on home. For a bunch of old men, y'all did all right today. Now go on home. Let a man through" (193). But as soon as the proud men prepare to go home, Luke Will and his gang show up.

All along, Luke Will has tried to convince Fix to go to Marshall Plantation. As we have seen, Fix does not listen to Luke but to Gil, who says that "Luke Will and his gang are a dying breed. They need a cause [like Beau's death] to pomp blood back into their bodies" (143). The name Luke Will itself echoes the word lukewarm. That is, he lacks the conviction to act alone. He receives his will or power in the kinds of situations Gil describes. Because Luke Will preys on the oppressed and weaker individuals, like Gaines's old men, he and his followers get drunk and go to Marshall Plantation without Fix. Luke Will's group confirms the statement that a character makes early in the novel about the Boutan type. A schoolteacher is sitting in a
bar talking about Beau's death and comments that white men riding with hoods do not exist anymore. The other character drinking with the teacher says, "I don't think we've progressed that much yet" (158).

The Luke Will kind further proves that the healing of hatred between blacks and whites is a slow process. When he arrives on Marshall Plantation, Luke Will is looking to have fun and scare the old men. The real humor comes when he learns that these men are armed with shotguns. The comic shoot-out between Luke Will's group and the old men points out the ludicrousness of a past of hatred and prejudice. When Luke Will tries to succumb to the old men, Charlie Biggs tells Mapes, "They go'n put me in that 'lectric chair for one, might's well put me in there for two. No deal" (205).

Charlie's wanting to continue the battle further demonstrates his new courage and pride. "Don't never be scared no more," he tells one of the old men as they dodge the bullets. "Life's so sweet when you know you ain't no more coward" (208). With this bravery, however, comes a sacrifice, as we see in the description Dirty Red gives of the sudden quietness on the plantation.
But we had all gathered around Charlie. Mathu had knelt down 'side him and raised his head out of the dust. They had really got him. Right in the belly. He laid there like a big old bear looking up at us. He was trying to say something, but it never came out. He kept on looking at us, but after a while you could tell he wasn't seeing us no more. I leaned over and touched him, hoping that some of that stuff he had found back there in the swamps might rub off on me. After I touched him, the rest of the men did the same. Then the women, even Candy. Then Glo told her grandchildren they must touch him, too. (209-210)

Charlie's death is the beginning, not the end of change and bears the same significance as Ned Douglass' death does in Miss Jane Pittman. That is, Charlie's death will become a past worth preserving, a past that will remind blacks in Bayonne that a man does not stop being a man because someone calls him a boy. What makes him a man is his willingness to take a stand for truth and to have respect for self. Charlie's returning to face his crime makes him noble. His rebellion against Luke Will's group makes him heroic.

But Charlie's death is just one sacrifice for change in the novel. Although Beau and Luke Will die because of their hatred of blacks, their deaths serve
as a warning to other oppressors that the black community will no longer yield to abuse from the dominant, white society. This is not to say that the relationship between the two races will be necessarily warmer, Gaines implies. In fact, one of the multiple narrators of the novel reports that Beau and Luke Will are buried in Bayonne; whereas, Charlie is buried on Marshall Plantation. The separate burial sites suggest that there will always be traces of alienation and segregation. What matters, finally, is that the process of social freedom has begun.

When Catherine Carmier walks into the house to be with her father and leaves Jackson Bradley standing in the yard stricken with emotional pain, Gaines leads the reader wanting to learn more about the characters. "After I end a novel I am no longer concerned with what my characters do," says Gaines an interview with John O'Brien. "That's another story."/5/ Interestingly, the other story usually contains characters like James Kelley, Jackson Bradley, Aunt Fe, or Marcus Payne. Each book portrays southern communities of "folk" (in the sense of folk culture) resisting or yielding to
oppressive, unexamined conventions of society. Rather than yield to the dominant influences of tradition and society, many of Gaines's characters try to negotiate their way to freedom. Yet the influences of racism, hatred, fear, and prejudice are so powerful that complete social freedom seems impossible. The narrator of Of Love and Dust comes close to expressing Gaines's point of view about man's relationship to the dominant influences of tradition: "He's not going to win, he can't ever win; but if he struggle hard and long enough he can ease his pains a little. I mean he can spread it out more and it won't hurt so much all at once" (52). The memory of past suffering, the awareness of present incertitude, and the realization of further trouble have dimmed the "Day of Jubilee" that Gaines's older characters like James Kelly have waited for.

But Gaines is not the defeatist that Kelly or Aunt Margaret or old man Frank Laurent appears to be. Gaines's fiction reveals that one who wins a physical or social battle is not always the real victor. A physical defeat in Gaines's fiction often means a moral triumph. The characters' sundry battles against the influences of tradition, or the past, result in moral victories. In other words, Gaines's characters may
never win against tradition in the plain sense of the word, but these characters must make a conscious effort, often followed by a moral or physical sacrifice, to seek right, to seek truth, to seek justice and equality. This is what James Kelly learns in Of Love and Dust. In the past, he was not willing to put up a struggle against those who dominated him, but he expected God, his "deus ex machina" we might say, to liberate blacks from oppression.

Each novel shows the characters' reactions to the influences of tradition in the Louisiana South. We, along with Gaines, watch the characters mature as they try to understand and define themselves within the larger forces of the South. These forces affect black, white, and Cajun. While Gaines's fiction seems to concentrate on the plight of rural Southern blacks, the focus is actually the human condition in general. If one calls Gaines's fiction social protest literature, one must appropriately refer not to protest against whites, but against tradition, which has handed down racist attitudes. Gaines's fiction evokes sympathy not just for black victims of injustice, but also for those who are used as tools of social forces. Gaines's works, moreover, are about human limitations of life.
In this sense, all of Gaines's characters are minorities when pitted against the powerful influences of tradition.

Because Gaines's fiction is about the universal, that is, about that—fear, pain, love, death—which is common to all races, he can avoid the trap that many a black writer has fallen in. Gaines might concur with Ralph Ellison that "too many books by Negro writers are addressed to a white audience. By doing this the authors run the risk of limiting themselves to the audience's presumptions of what a Negro is or should be; the tendency is to become involved in polemics, to plead the Negro's humanity. . . . For us the questions should be, what are the specific forms of that humanity, and what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning."/6/ The answer for Ellison, and to some extent for Gaines, lies in the folklore of a group's character. Gaines returns to Southern themes of pride, love, hatred, self, and the community because they offer him a history of his Louisiana South as he and his people have known it.

Writing about the South also allows Gaines to examine the values of tradition by which black, white, and Cajun have lived and died. In his fiction,
moreover, the characters attempt to modify these values. We can almost expect Gaines's next book to continue exploring the process of change. As long as one group is oppressed, Gaines implies, all groups will be oppressed, for the destiny of one group is inevitably linked to the destiny of the other group. As a devoted writer, Gaines will probably continue to produce fiction that reveals the feelings, habits, and customs of the rural South, namely mythical Bayonne, Louisiana.
Notes


3 John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980) 281. The issue of black non-economic development can be traced back to slavery. Franklin reports that "it was difficult for Negroes to purchase desirable farmlands even if they had the capital. With the destruction of institutions of slavery, whites looked upon land as their only important capital investment; they were reluctant to sell land to Negroes, whom they did not want to enjoy the power that came from the ownership of land in the South."


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