Movements in Dignity: A Critical Examination of Selected Works by Ernest J. Gaines

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MOVEMENTS IN DIGNITY: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF
SELECTED WORKS BY ERNEST J. GAINES

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To my parents
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ABSTRACT

Ernest J. Gaines’ work articulates the social, political, and economic position of society’s most vulnerable citizens: the poor, voiceless, disenfranchised, and invisible. From his youthful days on the plantation to his adult years in California and to his eventual return to the Point Coupee Plantation, his affection for the land has not diminished. My examination of Bloodline (1968), Gaines’ only collection of short stories, In My Father’s House (1978), and A Lesson Before Dying (1993) will show how the central themes of his fiction have remained consistent throughout the years and how his sense of place has not wavered. Each work depicts the common strivings of the disenfranchised, the control of subservient labor by the majority class, and the folk culture that helps foster leadership and generate change. As Gaines writes openly and passionately about the common people of his childhood, the most critical aspect of each work in this study is the impact of racism upon black men – especially husbands and fathers – and the overall effect it has on the black family. Additional to this study is a personal interview conducted with Gaines at his residence in Oscar, Louisiana, on May 31, 2006.
INTRODUCTION

Explicit in the canon of Ernest J. Gaines’ work is the intersection of history and universal themes of self-respect, human dignity, and personal integrity. Through simple, unvarnished dialogue and sparse physical descriptions, his work offers homage to ordinary black citizens who not only deserve respect in their everyday lives but crave it as a matter of order and sensibilities. As a son of the South, Gaines’ obsession with the speech, cultural traditions, and mores specific to the Point Coupee Plantation in Oscar, Louisiana, is notable in each of his seven works of fiction. When Gaines left the plantation in 1948 to join his mother and stepfather in Vallejo, California, he had, by that time, become so enamored with the land and its people that he was unable to remove himself psychologically from the region. He maintains that “the body went to California, but the soul remained in Louisiana. I left but I didn’t leave. Something kept holding me back, holding me back here” (Interview, 2006).

Even though his experiences on the plantation shaped him the memories did not dissipate because of his relocation. On the plantation there were people, he says, “who knew my grandparents’ grandparents. . . . So something about it [the plantation] just kept me here . . . and I know that it was because I still felt connected to everything here” (Interview, 2006). While his work captures the African American cultural and storytelling traditions of the rural south, his interest remains grounded in the region of his birth: the quarters of the Point Coupee plantation in southern Louisiana. The actual plantation is a cultural force in his life and serves as the fictional Bayonne community of his work. This dissertation, a thematic study of three works, Bloodline (1968), In My Father’s House (1978), and A Lesson Before Dying (1993), examines ways in which the community, as the site for social change, helps define notions of manhood, contributes to the social construct of male identity, and serves as the backdrop of cultural consciousness.

Gaines credits Faulkner and other writers, including Hemingway and Joyce, with helping shape his writing. Russian author Ivan Turgenev was also among his influences, whose Fathers and Sons (1862) served as a model for many of his works. Faulkner however, “showed me how to describe the country stores, how people sat around on the
porches . . . how to concentrate in a single area. . . . [W]hen it came to characters reacting, it was my judgment . . . not Faulkner’s” (Interview, 2006). Gaines’ greatest influences, finally, come from the plantation: “I draw from the old people. I draw from this land. . . .” (Interview, 2006).

Gaines’ “draw from the land” is an apt description of his body of work, which extends over a sixty-year period. It is my hope that this study will contribute to existing scholarship in the Gaines repertoire, continue to foster an interest in his work, and extend the intellectual discourse on the literary south. Although the three works in this study are separated by a span of ten and fifteen years, respectively, the themes remain the same. From his first internationally published short story, “The Sky is Gray” (1963), to his most critically acclaimed work, A Lesson Before Dying (1993), Gaines’ fiction retains an important place in the canon of American literature.

His work articulates the social, political, and economic position of society’s most vulnerable citizens: the poor, voiceless, disenfranchised, and invisible. From his youthful days on the Point Coupee Plantation to his adult years in California and to his eventual return to the plantation, his affection for the land has not diminished: “When I started teaching at UL [University of Louisiana at Lafayette] in 1981, I was . . . always coming back here. . . . [B]ecause I feel that I am still close to the people, my ancestors . . . I could not write about anything except the land, the bayous, the rivers, the swamps. I had no interest in anything else” (Interview, 2006). From the publication of his first short story “The Turtles” (1956) to his most recent work, Mozart and Leadbelly (2005), Gaines’ attachment to the plantation of his birth in southern Louisiana runs strong.

My study will discuss the recurring themes in Gaines’ fiction and how his sense of place has not wavered. The selected works depict the common strivings of the disenfranchised, the control of subservient labor by the majority class, and the folk culture that helps foster leadership and generate change. As Gaines writes openly and passionately about the common people of his childhood, the most critical aspect of each work in this study is the impact of racism upon black men – especially husbands and fathers – and the overall effect it has on the black family.
Chapters are arranged chronologically according to the date of the published work: Chapter I, Bloodline; Chapter II, In My Father’s House; and Chapter III, A Lesson Before Dying. Chapter III will focus specifically on “Jefferson’s Diary.” Each chapter shows an adherence to and a progression of the themes present in the Gaines canon: notions of manhood and black masculinity, identity, community and cultural connections to the land, and lessons of respect and accountability.

Bloodline incorporates five short stories: “The Sky is Gray,” “A Long Day in November,” “Three Men,” Bloodline,” and “Just Like a Tree.” With the exception of “Just Like a Tree,” a narrative folk tale featuring women and men in the community who are witnesses to the racial politics of the times, the stories focus primarily on notions of manhood and black masculinity. In My Father’s House captures the anguish and disillusionment of the Reverend Phillip J. Martin, a popular community activist whose past comes back to haunt him but whose past, ironically, also serves as the change agent in his life. In A Lesson Before Dying, I examine the fractious relationship between Grant Wiggins, the central figure in the novel, and Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Vivian Baptiste, the three women who, in many ways, dictate his life choices and mandate his relationship with Jefferson, the condemned man.

My critique underscores the gender politics at work in the novel as the women constantly try to manage, control, and govern Grant’s affairs. As an extension of the examination of the relationship between the women and Grant, I also focus specifically on chapter 29, “Jefferson’s Diary,” the notebook that Jefferson maintains at the urging of Grant. “Jefferson’s Diary” has typically been treated as a literary afterthought by critics and scholars whose focus has instead been a sustained analysis of the novel. My critique is a comprehensive study of this very critical chapter of Gaines’ text.

Contrary to critics in the 1960’s who argued that Gaines was not a “protest writer” but simply a “storyteller,” I contend that each narrative in Bloodline is a story of protest. Arranged according to the age and circumstance of the major male figure, each work speaks to the social, political, and economic issues of the period. The claim by writers that Gaines’ approach to the racial and political protests of the 1960’s was “soft” remains a sore spot for the author. For example, “Just Like a Tree,” he vehemently argues, is
certainly a protest story. “Here’s this woman from the North coming to get her aunt because of the violence that’s going on down there [in the South], and the young man coming to tell her, ‘I know the bombing is going on, and I know they want me to stop, but I cannot stop. I must continue to protest’” (Interview, 2006). He cites “The Sky is Gray” as another example of protest writing:

“If you look at the very first story that I published internationally, ‘The Sky is Gray,’ where those people have to walk up and down the cold street in the town, if that is not protest, I don’t know what protest is. Those people are cold, those people are hungry. This child is in pain. Isn’t that protest? Isn’t that protest? What am I supposed to do? Get thrown out of a restaurant or start a demonstration in front of the courthouse or something like that?
The struggle was showing the only way I knew how to work to better my conditions. From ‘The Sky is Gray’ to In My Father’s House. . . . I try and put it [protest] in my writing as much as I possibly can. If an ordinary reader does not see that’s protest against the racism of segregation, then I can’t do anything else about that.” (Interview 2006)

Surviving against all odds with grace, dignity, and respect frames the physical and psychological movement of the major figures in the five stories that comprise Gaines’ only collection of short stories.

Of Gaines’ seven literary works, In My Father’s House is the novel most unfavorably received by critics. In his attempt to address issues of father and son estrangement, he fails to develop the central character, Reverend Phillip Martin, beyond a stereotypical figure of the flamboyant, sexualized minister and small-town political activist. While the novel has notable strengths, its major flaws are its treatment of the moral, ethical, and social issues that separate sons and fathers, its notion of manhood, and its “representative” civil rights spokesman as the savior of the disenfranchised and
downtrodden. Gaines concedes that he had “all kinds of problems” with the book, including the point of view from which the story is told, as well as Phillip Martin’s sense of redemption at novel’s end. I maintain that the novel’s flaws do not overwhelm the text to such an extent that Phillip Martin is unable to reclaim himself at the end of his physical, moral, and spiritual journey to redemption.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines’ most critically received work, Grant Wiggins, the plantation school teacher, reluctantly returns to the quarters with the objective of teaching the children of the plantation. He is angry at his lot in life and winds up greatly disillusioned at what he views as a cultural submissiveness by the residents. His frustrations are enhanced by the mandate that he teach Jefferson, who has been called a “hog” by the defense attorney, how to die with dignity. As Grant helps Jefferson realize the latent strength of his own character, Grant begins to understand that achieving manhood is more than simply reaching adulthood. He comes to understand that other forces in one’s life must be acknowledged and embraced if strength of character is to be achieved.

Every major character in *A Lesson Before Dying* has a first and last name or a title and surname. Everyone, that is, except Jefferson, the 21-year-old-semi-illiterate man who has an impending date with death. His singular name suggests that he is of little significance within the larger society, and he has no identity beyond his duties as a plantation field hand. This sense of invisibility and *nothingness* is conveyed in “Jefferson’s Diary.” Extending the theme of the black man’s search for manhood, Gaines posits the notion that manhood can indeed be achieved if opportunities are presented. Jefferson’s moment of opportunity comes in Grant’s gift to him of a notebook and pencil. Jefferson’s movement from invisibility to a declaration of manhood is constructed through the words he writes in the journal as he awaits his ultimate fate.

From admitting that he has never written a letter to requesting that his completed journal be delivered to the community after his execution, Jefferson discovers his inner self, reconciles his past with the present, and comes to grips with his imminent death. “Writing for Life: ‘Jefferson’s Diary’ as Transformative Text” shows the evolution of a man powerless to save his physical being but strong enough to claim his own voice. His
words not only help him through the most tumultuous period in his life, they will, he hopes, help others in the community to understand their own lives.

Additional to this study is my personal interview conducted with Gaines at his residence in Oscar, Louisiana, on May 31, 2006. The interview, which includes a critical introduction, serves as the appendix to this dissertation. It is my intent that “Movements in Dignity: A Critical Examination of Selected Works by Ernest J. Gaines,” augmented by the personal interview, will extend the scholarship on and interest in the canon of Gaines’ work. Specifically, I hope that this study of Bloodline, In My Father’s House, and A Lesson Before Dying will serve as a portal for closer readings of his works and continue to foster research on the themes that govern his writings. Finally, I hope that this study will prompt scholars to take further note of the richness and complexities of contemporary southern literature.
CHAPTER I: BLOODLINE
“A Long Day in November”
Can I Get A Witness?
Community as Site for Social Change

In “A Long Day in November” (1958), the introductory story in Bloodline (1968), Gaines’ only collection of short stories, Sonny, the six-year-old narrator, struggles to understand his position within the institutions of family and community. In the opening scene of the narrative, Sonny’s reluctance to move from the warmth of his bed “because it’s cold up there” (3) suggests his awareness of a harsher world beyond the comfort and security of his personal space. “It’s warm under here and it’s dark, because I keep my eyes shut because I don’t want to get up” (3). Sonny’s comments are important to the story’s theme of patriarchal responsibility, because they foretell his eventual move from the safety of the quarters to a larger and more complex space. While Sonny’s comments can be seen as a reference to the home’s temperature, they also imply that beyond the protected space of the community the world is callous and unforgiving.

Sonny’s fetal position in the bed – and the multiple layers of covering – imply a womb-like image and an enfolding warmth and protection from the outside world. Against this backdrop of familial comfort and safety Gaines transports the narrative’s theme of youthful innocence versus adult responsibility. When Octavia, Sonny’s mother, “grabs the covers” (3) she exposes him to the light outside the “womb” and threatens his sense of security. This matriarchal act symbolizes the impending rupture of Sonny’s safe world. His view of the “fence back of the house” (5) and the “big pecan tree over by the other fence by Miss Viola Brown’s house” (5) suggests that he will soon become part of the extended community. Also, references to “the stars in the air” (5) suggest the security of his world is about to take on a heightened dimension. Valerie Babb argues that Sonny’s acknowledgment of the outer environment “signals an outward quest” (Ernest Gaines, 17) as well as his “sense of unity” (17).

The innocence of Sonny’s dialogue with his mother regarding the impending move from his home in the quarters speaks to a harmless and subconscious sense of the importance of the family unit:

“Tomorrow morning when you get up me and
you leaving here, hear?”
“Where we going?” I ask.
“We going to Gran’mon,” Mama says.
“We leaving us house?” I ask.
“Yes,” she says.
“Daddy leaving, too?”
“No,” she says. “Just me and you.”
“Daddy don’t want leave?”
“I don’t know what your daddy wants. . . . We leaving, hear?”
“Uh-huh,” I say. (Bloodline, 6)

While Sonny does not understand the necessity of the move, his inquiry shows that he understands leaving a familiar space for an unknown place will be a daunting challenge. In the trade-off of the smaller site for a larger, more complex arena, the outside community, Sonny begins to slowly recognize the importance of the family unity and the imminent separation. His recognition of the sanctity of the family unit can be seen as he gazes upon the farm site outside the home: “I’m sure glad I ain’t no pig. They ain’t got no mama and no daddy and no house” (9). Although Octavia provides Sonny’s primary care, his relationship to her becomes secondary when his father appears at the family’s home. No longer is Sonny the obedient child of his mother. He becomes, in his father’s presence, a child who wishes to emulate the parent most like him: his father, Eddie.

An integral part of being a dutiful son, in Sonny’s youthful imagination, is recognizing his father’s position in the family and obliging his requests. In Eddie’s request that Sonny love him, he is, maintains Babb, “essentially asking Sonny to bolster a fragile pattern of self-esteem” (EG, 17). According to Gaines, part of the father’s need for validation from his son occurs “because of the situation in which he [Eddie] lived. . . . [H]e became irresponsible and couldn’t hold the family together” (Interview, 2006). Although Eddie’s obsession is the center of the family discord, the debate functions primarily around acknowledging and accepting responsibility for one’s actions. As the father attempts to reunite his splintered family, the son watches him reconstruct paternal identity through communal ties. Outside the physical structure of Sonny’s home are key
community members who figure prominently in Eddie’s response to his obligation as a father and man.

Madame Toussaint, an independent and powerful figure in the community, “personifies history, as represented through her bearing the name of the black freedom fighter Toussaint-L’Ouverture” (EG, 21). As the community’s unorthodox spiritual leader, she adds, asserts Babb, “the dimension of the ancestral folkpast to Eddie’s quest for manhood” (21). Madame Toussaint, modeled after a real-life conjure woman from an earlier period in Gaines’ life, is a dark, foreboding figure who commands respect in the community. Oftentimes the conjure woman’s eccentric manner is an identifying marker and one that defines her in the community. To those who seek her advice she is known to meet the objective of their requests. Many who seek her counsel are men whose lives are fragmented and whose relationships with women are in need of repair. Not all visitors to conjure women, however, are seekers of relationship advice. Many times, the wisdom of the sage prompts a visit born out of curiosity. Gaines recounts his own fear and skepticism in meeting a community/conjure woman for the first time:

“When I was writing The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), there was an old woman who lived next door to some people I knew in Baton Rouge, and she was supposed to be one of these women. . . . I had never been around these kind of people, and I just wanted to talk to her. But I was afraid to go over there alone, so I took this little girl over there with me . . . and the old lady had all these colored bottles turned upside down on the walkway leading up to the house.”

He describes the interior of the woman’s home:

“[W]hen I got inside her house she had postcards and Christmas cards that decorated the entire place. She must have been saving those things for over fifty years! She had them stuck all over the place! We just talked. We had a general conversation. She was the first ‘one’ I’d ever visited. . . . ”
of people could do things to you! [Laughter]”

(Interview, 2006).

Madame Toussaint provides a sustaining, mysterious presence in the quarters, and as Eddie seeks to reunite his wife and son his willingness to seek advice from the most powerful woman in the community is significant. She is a woman whose gender sets her “in opposition to a man whose complacency restrains his capacity to act” (Babb, 20). Eddie’s seeking the advice of another woman – who, presumably, has “powers” – counteracts his relationship with his wife whose voice he does not value.

The men in Gaines’ literary canon are, typically, restless wanderers, wayward, and rebellious, and the women most often provide the steadying influence in their lives. Reverend Phillip J. Martin, the married, charismatic preacher and political activist in In My Father’s House (1978), admits to being a “rover” (214) as does his childhood friend, Chippo Simon. In Of Love and Dust (1964), Marcus, the central figure in the novel, disrupts the serenity of the plantation by having a forbidden affair with a married white woman. The influential words of prominent women in the community eventually, however, lead the men to a measure of accountability.

Lacking familial ties to Eddie does not deter Madame Toussaint from providing him the most risky counsel. He must burn the car, the object of his obsession, if he wishes to reunite his family. Eddie’s obsession with the car, she declares, will be replaced with a devotion to his wife. His adherence to the mandate will hopefully lead him to unification with his family. Gaines offers no evidence in the novel to suggest that Madame Toussaint is trained in her craft or that she eschews a specific religious belief to support her advice and reputation in the community. The reader is left to assume that Madame Toussaint’s skills are self-acquired and perfected over years of practicing. Eddie represents the community’s belief that she is a spiritualist, possesses healing powers, and is therefore a competent sage as evidenced by her remark: “That’s all you men come back here for” (BL, 46).

She adheres to her own dictates and principles and disputes Eddie’s notion that she might be mistaken in her advice to him: “You trying to tell me my business? I should hope not” (47). Even as a six-year-old observer of his father’s interaction with Madame Toussaint, Sonny sees her position in the community as crucial, specifically as it relates
to his family. Much of Sonny’s reasoning comes as a result of his relationship to his estranged father. Sonny trusts that the woman’s “powers” are strong enough to reunite his family. He cautiously digests her words as she chastises Eddie:

“Lately I’ve been having men dropping in three times a day. All of them just like you. What they can do to make their wives love them more. What they can do to keep their wives from running round with some other man. What they can do to make their wives scratch their backs. What can they do to make their wives look at them when they talking to her...” (50)

As Robert Lauscher notes, Madame Toussaint’s insight into the marital discord of Sonny’s parents “may simply derive from the knowledge of the community and human nature. She understands the sexual politics of domestic tensions engendered by life in the quarters...” (Critical Reflections, 80). As the community’s resident sage, Madame Toussaint’s empathy for oppressed women arises, Lauscher further notes, “out of sympathy for the black women, victimized by husbands so obsessed with their restlessness that they lose sight of their spouses’ need” (81). Madame Toussaint offers a final bit of wisdom to Eddie on the subject of understanding a woman’s emotional bearings:

“You men done messed up the outside world so bad that they feel lost and out of place in it... [B]ut you men don’t know any of this. Y’all never know how a woman feels because you never ask how she feels. Long’s she’s there when you get there you satisfied... [B]ut keep on. One day all of you’ll find out.” (BL, 61)

Madame Toussaint’s offers a different perspective on what must be done in order for Eddie’s to transform himself into a family man and present himself as a responsible husband and father. Her advice, and, subsequently, his decision to accept it, not only acknowledges her influence in the community, but it also shows his willingness to
change. Most significantly, his impending actions suggest that his growth as a man is an evolving process.

As Sonny watches his father’s slow transformation, he also becomes an unwitting participant in the upcoming event. His saying, “Come on, Daddy. . . . [L]et’s go burn up the car” (67), suggests that he, too, is prepared to become part of the reunification process. As Eddie arranges for the entire plantation to witness his change from irresponsible husband and father to a man of character, his actions not only impact his standing in the community, they affect his relationship with his son as well. Eddie’s decision to publicize the car-burning event serves a dual purpose: It is the culminating act of a man who acknowledges his past misdeeds and wants to reunite the family, and it serves as a statement to the community that the family unit is an important institution that must be preserved. The irony of the act, however, derives from the accepted advice of a “known” stranger in the community. In Eddie’s rush to reunite the family, he fails to make the connection between the mistreatment of his wife and son and his acquiescence to counsel from another woman.

In the communal ties that bind the families of the quarters, everyone witnesses Eddie’s action as a life-changing behavior. The impending spectacle will reinforce his role as a person in charge of the family unit. In his evolutionary process he exchanges an adversarial relationship with his wife for a more congenial one. At the bonfire, Sonny’s observation that his father’s voice “. . . don’t even sound like Daddy voice” (71) suggests that Eddie’s metamorphosis is immediate. Tossing the matches into the gasoline-soaked car as members of the community look on sustains the reality of his transformation. Eddie’s repeatedly igniting the fire symbolizes the intensity of his desire to change: the powerful blaze will destroy all vestiges of his previous life.

As the community affirms his status from a car-obsessed “boy” to a responsible adult, he is proclaimed by his mother-in-law a “man after all” (71). It is important to note that essential declarations regarding Eddie’s manhood are delivered by women. Eddie’s wife delivers the first mandate that he must change his behavior, and Madame Toussaint issues the ultimate mandate. In the end, it is Eddie’s mother-in-law who proclaims his manhood. The community who once witnessed his boy-like exploits now becomes the eyes, ears, and voices he needs to help validate his claim of manhood.
The impact of the community scene is not lost on Sonny: “I go where Mama is and Mama takes my hand. Daddy raises his head and looks at the people standing round looking at us” (72). The mother’s taking of the son’s hand symbolizes the subconscious act of her taking Eddie’s hand in the marital pronouncement of their union as man and wife. The son will one day assume the position as head of his own family. The scene of the reunited family standing in the midst of the crowd of onlookers is powerful. As Eddie thanks the community for coming to the event, his comment, “Thank y’all” (72), serves a dual purpose. It acknowledges his need for the public to serve witness in his transformation, and it shows his appreciation for the community’s role in helping him reunite his family. His imminent change renews Sonny’s faith in the family unit and the possibility that it can be made whole again.

One of the key ironies of the narrative occurs near the end of the story. Eddie’s life-changing event and the community’s participation in it dichotomizes the narrative’s final scene. His wife wants him to physically abuse her as validation of his manhood, and while Eddie’s needs for patriarchal validation from the community are met, he does not conform to his wife’s theory of community validation. Gaines explains the irony of the scene of purposeful, domestic violence:

“The wife wants him to beat her because it will ‘prove’ to the community that her husband is a man. See, that theme of manhood comes up again. But the wife demands it. Sonny did not want to do anything like that. The wife wants him to do that. She tells him, ‘You’ve got to do that, because I don’t want anybody laughing at my husband in the street for burning up his car. So you’ve got to do that."

Gaines continues in explanation of Sonny’s behavior:

“‘You’ve got to punish me.’ But he says, ‘I don’t want to do that.’ The wife believes that Sonny needs the community to see that he is a man, and the physical scars will indeed prove to everyone that he is a man.” (Interview, 2006)
As Eddie has sought the words of the community conjure woman and has been proclaimed “a man after all” (BL, 71), the violence he unwillingly inflicts upon his wife detracts from his image as a respectful man and responsible father. In his wife’s explanation that she didn’t want him to be “the laughingstock of the plantation” (75) for destroying the car, Eddie must reconcile his act of violence to the notion that he must act on her behalf in an effort to remain united with his family. In a final, narrative irony Eddie now engages his wife’s wishes, something he was unable to do previously. While he is reluctant to accept her orders, he does so as he has also accepted the injunctions of Madame Toussaint and his mother-in-law. Eddie’s validation and declaration of manhood comes as a result of the female voice and intervention.

Babb asserts that Sonny’s “review of the day’s events displays his heightened esteem for his father, an esteem he may intuit from his family and community now seeing Eddie as a stronger man and father” (EG, 22). The scene of violence that Sonny witnesses between his father and mother, though disturbing, does not diminish his need for familial structure, even as he attempts to intervene on his mother’s behalf. As Eddie’s journey is complete, so is Sonny’s. His journey from an insecure six-year-old boy, frightened by his family’s fragmentation, to an insightful young boy is a critical step in his development as a young child. As he internalizes, at narrative’s end, his day-long adventures in the quarters, he reconciles himself to a feeling of warmth and security in his home, the site which earlier served as a place of discontent. While some feminist critics might see Gaines’ fictional treatment of black women as subservient, condescending, and “man-dependent” in their respective roles, he maintains that he doesn’t care “what other people think” about his work. He continues writing, he declares, despite the criticisms and he engages the craft “as well as I possibly can” (Interview, 2006).

Sonny returns full circle to his “womb” of comfort, quietly remarking, “Us house smell good. I hear the spring on Mama and Daddy’s bed. I get way under the cover. . . . [I]t’s some dark under here. I feel good ‘way under here” (BL, 79). Where Sonny initially questions his mother by referencing their dual union, “Where we going?” (6), he now replaces the collective term “we” with “us,” including his father this time. The word “us” suggests Sonny’s renewed sense of stability, security, and ownership of his previous surroundings. His return to the home is a return to his protected space. In his father’s
adherence to Madame Toussaint’s orders, Sonny’s initial fear of her is now replaced by a sense of gratitude for her role in reuniting his parents: “. . . God bless Madame Toussaint” (79). As Eddie prepares for his role as responsible husband and father, Sonny has a newer understanding of the power and importance of figures in the community and their contribution in forming and shaping the lives of its members.
“The Sky is Gray”
Carrying On and Making Me See:
Marking a Path to Manhood

“We are the children of those who choose to survive.”

--- Nana Poussaint in Daughters of the Dust

“The Sky is Gray” (1963), Gaines’ first internationally published short story, explores a theme of self-respect, poverty, and racism. Most significantly, however, the narrative extends a motif present in Gaines canon of work: how personal responsibility and self-respect are barometers that define one’s identity. Aside from explicit representations of African American culture grounded in the faith and sensibilities of community, “The Sky is Gray” functions in part, argues Valerie Babb, as a story “in the bildungsroman tradition” (Ernest Gaines: A Critical Companion, 24). Like Sonny, the six-year-old narrator in “A Long Day in November,” the introductory story in Bloodline, James, the eight-year-old narrator in “The Sky is Gray,” experiences a series of events outside the protected space of his home and community that allow him to move from a stage of dependency upon his mother, Octavia, to an understanding of the responsibilities inherent in his progress toward adulthood.

As he physically moves about the region outside the rural setting of the quarters, to the urban setting of Bayonne, he witnesses phases of his mother’s character that help him understand her and the obstacles she faces on a daily basis. Moving around the area also helps him gain insight into his own future, the obstacles he will face, and the responsibilities he must engage as a black child growing up in a racist world. As he accompanies his mother on their journey, the trip is not only an enlightening experience; it is a frightening one as he witnesses the strength and character his mother exhibits in tense situations. His level of maturity and grasp of “adult maneuvering” permits his journey from childhood to young adulthood to begin.

The theme of self-respect and manhood is presented early in the narrative as James reflects upon his mother’s view of him as a “little man” in charge of the household during her absence: “She don’t worry too much if she leave me there with the smaller ones, ‘cause she know I’m gon’ look after them and look after Auntie and everything
else. I’m the oldest and she say I’m the man” (BL, 84). As his responsibilities in the home are defined by his gender and not his age, he must bear the responsibilities of an adult and assume the role of the patriarch. He learns lessons in stoicism from observing his strong, willful mother, and as he journeys into town he surmises that his physical and emotional needs must be kept intact to avoid the appearance of being “needy.”

As he has been taught and now believes, any outward expressions of weakness are perceived as “cry baby stuff, and she don’t want no crybaby round her” (BL, 84). He must not only assume a manly posture for his mother, it is his duty to assume it for himself as well. For Octavia, the very nature of crying is not only unmanly, it is considered a sign of timidity. In the absence of an adult male figure in the household, it is Octavia’s responsibility to teach him the realities of life outside the community. While the landscape of pastures, farm animals, and trees of their environment are real, they do not reflect the outside, racist world.

James’ first experience with racism comes during a bus ride to town where he observes signs marked “white” and “colored.” As this is his first bus ride, the signs foretell his subsequent encounters with racism. The signs are literally the first of many markers that will remind him of his racial status and his position outside the safe haven of the quarters, the community in which he lives. He instantaneously knows that he is an outsider. His comment, “. . . they got seats in the front, but I can’t sit there” (91) underscores his sensibilities that outside his own community is a society governed by different rules. As he enters the menacing and unfamiliar environment of the town, he must observe his mother’s savvy ways of survival and develop his own skills to ensure that his dignity and self-worth are not compromised in the present or in the future. From his mother’s teachings, he understands that the site of the learning is secondary to the lesson being taught: One does “necessary” things and must be resolute in order to survive.

While Octavia’s determination to survive – and also maintain – a level of respect may not be immediately recognized by James, he internalizes her strength of character. Her primary objective is to develop in her son the ability to survive in her absence. In a subtle lesson on survival, his negative response to an earlier mandate for him to kill a family of redbirds for dinner is eventually replaced by an understanding of the family’s
need for food. As he straddles childhood and young adulthood he notes, with a degree of innocence, that he is a child with adult responsibilities:

“I’m still young—I ain’t no more than eight, but I know now; I know why I had to do it. . . . [S]uppose she had to go away? That’s why I had to do it. Suppose she had to go away like Daddy went away? Then who was gon’ look after us? They had to be someone left to carry on. I didn’t know it then, but I know it now. Auntie and Monsieur Bayonne talked to me and made me see.” (BL, 90)

As he acknowledges the necessity of killing the redbirds, he also comprehends that he is replacing his father and assuming the role as provider. He is proud of his new status as “man” of the family:

“They was so little, though. They was so little. I ‘member how I picked the feathers off them and cleaned them and held them over the fire. Then we all ate them. Ain’t had but a little bitty piece each, but we all had a little bitty piece, and everybody just look at me ‘cause they was so proud.” (BL 90)

To James, his mother’s teachings may appear cruel and unrelenting, but he reveals a growing awareness of her desire to impart survival skills. As a young boy he equates hardship with the daily experiences of living. This is a way of life for him, and he accepts the realities of these difficult circumstances. He perceives, argues Babb, that “suffering seems a constant element of his existence” (EG, 25). His odyssey into the urban landscape is a continuation of the lessons he learns in the quarters.

His arrival at the dentist’s office is a significant marker along his road to young adulthood. He witnesses a verbal exchange between two black men espousing differing beliefs on God and religion. In the argument between the college student and the older preacher, he recognizes the power of verbal discourse, but he also understands how one’s pride and dignity must be maintained in the face of adversity. The idealistic college student distrusts the Christian man, and even in his youth the different philosophies
provide James an opportunity to decide whose argument he admires. The pairing of the itinerant preacher and a more refined member of the external community is a recurring construct in Gaines’ work. In *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) he presents the opposing religious principles of Grant Wiggins, the atheist school teacher charged with teaching Jefferson, the condemned man, how to “die with dignity,” against the theories of Reverend Ambrose, the plantation preacher who wants Grant to accept God, and he wants Jefferson to make peace with God before his execution. Reverend Phillip J. Martin, the charismatic minister in *In My Father’s House* (1978), is positioned against the lower class members of the St. Adrienne parish who worship him but who also recognize his religious and leadership failings.

The college student’s rhetorical eloquence is more prominent than the preacher’s antiquated philosophy, and the student conducts himself in a dignified and disciplined manner. Young James feels a kinship with the younger man because of his grace, calm, and deportment. As the situation between the men become volatile, James recognizes that non-violence is a noble trait that bears emulating. The student’s quiet assertion, while holding forth his position is, in James’ perspective, a measure of manhood. In the college student’s actions and his mother’s enduring character James is the recipient of two models of strength which, as he sees it, bear emulating.

The second marker of James’ journey occurs during an extended period outside the dentist’s office, where he and Octavia become, literally and figuratively, double outcasts. As race defines the first marker of James’ journey, economic status controls the second. Two instances of bravery and dignity depict the mother’s cunning survival skills. As Octavia outwits a white shopkeeper, she shrewdly negotiates the boundaries of her own circumstances and succeeds in her effort to provide temporary warmth for her son against the inclement weather. The act allows James to see the quiet dignity of his mother. In the company of the store owner Octavia operates under the performance of “masking,” the act of covering up one true purpose in order to obtain the desired result of another. Paul Laurence Dunbar asserts in the poem “We Wear the Mask” (1895) that in a social and racial debt blacks must pay in order to survive in a racist society, wits and a wily behavior must be part of the order:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while

We wear the mask.
We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise
We sign, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,

We wear the mask!

As James continually gains valuable lessons in dignity and respect, his final teaching comes as his mother refuses to be patronized by a racist white woman who offers the duo shelter from the cold weather. James and Octavia accept the shopkeeper’s offer of work; however, Helen’s constant references to James as “boy” are demeaning to Octavia and noticeable by him. Her words are representative of the South’s emasculation of black men by whites. Its use by the store clerk is a double-edge sword and a stinging rebuke of the lessons Octavia wishes to instill in her son: It contradicts the image of manhood Octavia envisions for James, and it contrasts the position of manhood her son sees himself taking in the future.

Helen never feels the need to ask Octavia or James to identify himself but offers a generalized, nondescript moniker: “I must show the boy where the garbage is. . . . [T]hat’s a good boy. . . . [C]ome, boy. . . . [C]ome in here, boy and go wash your hands” (BL, 114-16). While Helen links James’ physical stature to the word “boy,” Octavia receives the woman’s words in a different context. Their journey to town is not only a destination to be reached but one engaged by two disenfranchised people who must, in order to survive on a daily basis, “. . . just keep on going” (BL, 107).
The culminating scene between the two women displays a test of wills: Helen’s subconscious patronizing of mother and son versus Octavia’s mental strength and strong character. In contrast to previously warning James to keep his eyes “in front where they belong” (93), she and her son defy one of the South’s most strict codes of social conduct for blacks: looking directly into the eyes of white people when speaking. Octavia and James, in response to Helen’s order to remain in the store, “. . . stop again and look at her” (117). Octavia’s refusal of the excess food offered by Helen is a pivotal moment for James. Even in their most dire economic and physical straits, she refuses to relinquish her pride and dignity, and in her defiance James understands that a person’s character should never be compromised no matter how critical the circumstances. In the realm of their experiences he acknowledges a critical lesson about life, one that permeates Gaines’ work: there are artificial and real polarities that complicate and divide the world along racial lines, but many times one simply must “. . . keep on going” (107).

James’ journey outside his community to an unfamiliar world helps him form knowledge that will insure his psyche against devaluing confinement. In telling the white shopkeeper that he is unafraid to go to the dentist, his response indicates a much larger lesson. It suggests that he is unafraid to speak the truth, and even though difficult choices must be made in a society that is often unkind and unforgiving, one should not fear the unknown. He will confront his fears with strength, grace, and dignity.

His pilgrimage through Bayonne serves as crucial element in his growth and development. As he witnesses his mother’s stern and dignified behavior, he understands their shared life of poverty makes each more determined to move forward in a racist world. In recounting his days as a young boy on the Point Coupee’ plantation in Oscar, Louisiana, Gaines says:

“There were many hard days, many mean days. . . .
We [the children who lived on the plantation] had about five months of school, because we couldn’t go to school when we were needed in the field in the cotton field. We were about seven or eight years old; we were very small children. . . . [T]hose were some terrible, terrible times for us.” (Interview, 2006)
In Babb’s assertion that “The Sky is Gray” is a coming-of-age story, it is critical to note that the narrative reflects Gaines’ true life experiences on the Point Coupee’ plantation and beyond:

“There was racism and, of course, everything was segregated at that time. There’s still racism, but everything was segregated at that time. I couldn’t go to a place and have a decent drink of water or sandwich or anything like that. At the same time it seemed like the black people were much closer. They were constantly helping each other . . . because they knew you couldn’t get help out there, so they would help you on the place. . . . I saw some miserable days. My people suffered. . . . I am what I am because of them, and I cannot ever forget that. They suffered, but they endured and I survived. From their endurance, I survived.” (Interview, 2006)

James’ transition from a young boy dependent upon his mother, to a manchild who envisions one day caring for her, is evident: “I say to myself, I’m go’n make up all this. I want say it now; I want tell her how I feel right now, but Mama don’t like for us to talk like that” (BL, 110). Even though he thinks like a child, his growth and maturity will eventually lead him to a path of responsibility and true manhood. His pilgrimage to manhood begins with Octavia’s stern admonition at the narrative’s beginning: “Stand for yourself, by yourself” (106), a familiar theme in Gaines’ canon. Octavia’s final declaration to her son, as he braves himself against the cold weather by turning up his collar, “You not a bum. . . . You a man” (117), affirms his journey from innocence to awareness. James achieves a sense of self-worth, acquires the necessary skills to move forward in an unkind word, and possesses the strength to cope with life outside the comfort, safety, and security of his community.
“Three Men”

Generational Surrogacy: The Bonds We Share

If we stand tall it is because we stand
on the backs of those who came before us.
--- Yoruba proverb

In “Three Men” (1968), the center story in Bloodline, Gaines continues the exploration of manhood and identity politics by aptly positioning the narrative behind “A Long Day in November” and “The Sky is Gray.” In contrast to the youthful ages of Sonny (“LDN”) and James (“SIG”), Proctor Lewis, the central figure and narrator in “Three Men,” is a nineteen-year-old man whose criminal exploits land him in jail. The setting of the narrative, a small cell occupied by three men, is significant on two levels: It departs from the traditional communal setting of Gaines’ fiction, and it is the only story in the collection where the primary action takes place outside the immediate boundaries of Bayonne, the fictional setting of his canon of work.

In the opening scene Proctor makes a critical observation of the site where he surrenders after killing a man in a fight which he initiates but that was made violent by the victim. As he enters the small office he notices two white officers “. . . who sat inside a little railed-in office” (BL, 121) that contains “. . . one of them little gates that swung in and out” (121). As significant as Proctor’s observation of the officers’ space is his action at the moment they see him. “I pushed the gate open and went in. I made sure it didn’t swing back. . . ” (121).

The motion of the gate symbolizes the back and forth cycle of Proctor’s entrance to and exit from jails over the years. “I had been there [in the jail] two or three times. . . . I had been in a couple other jails two or three times, too. . . ” (123). The instant he restricts the movement of the gates, he subconsciously affirms a desire to change the destructive behavior that consistently restricts his freedom. In “Three Men” Gaines sets forth the argument that personal triumph is possible through a willingness to acknowledge one’s errant ways. As Proctor Lewis ponders the consequences of confessing prior criminal offenses to the officers, he silently proclaims: “. . . I wasn’t go’n say anything about them either. If they hadn’t put it on my record that was they hard luck” (123). Even as he adopts the derogatory language of the jailers, referring to himself
as “. . . just a nigger . . . ” (121), he slowly begins to see beyond an external description of himself. He envisions himself more in control. As he is escorted to the cell he is reminded of the jailers who refuse to acknowledge his presence at the gate: “They looked at me, but . . . they went back to talking like I wasn’t even there” (121). Overcoming his own sense of invisibility is a crucial factor in his journey to manhood.

Similar to the gloomy atmosphere that sets the tone in “The Sky is Gray,” the dark cell controls the surroundings in “Three Men.” As the cell door closes, the guard asks Proctor a critical question: “When will y’all learn?” (123). The question is a verbal condemnation of the nature and continuously destructive behavior of not only Proctor but all black men. The question also places Proctor at the center of his fate and challenges him to rise above his impending position as an incarcerated man. Incarceration, argues Valerie Babb, becomes the “liberation leading to Proctor’s manhood” (Ernest Gaines, 30).

Specific to Proctor’s surrender is a statement that says the killing of a black man by another black man is no cause for alarm in the community. The inevitable scenario of Proctor’s criminal actions will be an immediate bonding out of jail by Mr. Roger Medlow, an influential plantation owner. Racial practices of southern Louisiana in the 1940’s allowed plantation owners to secure the freedom of jailed black men in exchange for their commitment to perform day labor on the plantation. Proctor’s access to freedom comes, therefore, at a high price: his subjugation by the very system that institutes the rules by which he must abide. His reference to himself as a “nigger” is a label of invisibility that he must destroy in order to claim himself outside the social constructs of the institution of racism. As he recalls the events leading to his two-day incarceration, he engages what Mary Ellen Doyle calls a “camcorder narration technique”: “. . . the whirring camera capturing the now-moments of an engaged protagonist. . . .” (Voices From the Quarters, 57).

On the outside Proctor has the freedom to conduct himself as he see fit. He adheres to no one’s rules and behaves according to his own conscience. In the jail cell with two other men, however, he must negotiate the physical space he will share with strangers. He must also internalize the behavior that consistently places him in an oppressive position within a system he detests. For the first time he begins to feel a sense
of isolation and despair at his predicament: “I felt lonely and I felt like crying. But I couldn’t cry. Once you started that in here you was done for. Everybody and his brother would run over you” (BL, 127). His refusal to cry is the first marker of his movement toward manhood. As Gaines does in “The Sky is Gray,” he consistently employs narrative markers to suggest that a protagonist’s views of his surroundings are acute and personal transformations are forthcoming.

Even as Proctor’s placement in the cell with Munford Bazille, the veteran criminal, and Hattie, the outward homosexual, is questioned by Munford, the theme of manhood is present early in the narrative. Gaines’ triangulation of three men of different ages and generations suggests that reaching manhood is as much a psychological journey as it is a physical one. The gender dynamics present in “Three Men,” asserts Doyle, offer a “changing order of . . . gender and generational relationships” (VQ, 45).

Proctor Lewis sees himself as a brash, smart, and wise young man. In the eyes of the white community, however, he is akin to an animal. Munford diffuses Proctor’s view of himself and informs him that his (Proctor’s) humanness is only recognized in his own community, not in the larger society. Proctor’s non-humanness begins, claims Munford, “from the cradle” (BL, 141): “. . . A nigger ain’t worth a good gray mule. Don’t mention a white mule: fifty niggers ain’t worth a good white mule” (141). Munford’s comments suggest that he, too, has bought into the notion of invisibility articulated by white society. The use of animal metaphors is a staple in the Gaines repertoire. The most prominent use of the metaphor is in In A Lesson Before Dying (1993), where the defense attorney for Jefferson, the condemned man, equates him to a hog. In “Three Men,” argues Babb, the animal reference “underscores Proctor’s transformation from what is essentially an unthinking brute with no concern for the value of human life to a rational man who deems human life as worthy” (EG, 29).

Proctor’s deference to the rules of establishment, as well as to the labels assigned him – and thus all black men of his era – is telling. In his vision of himself he is a “nobody,” and he views other black men through identical lens. He embraces the whites’ derogatory term and their refusal to see him, and says, in explanation of the man he has fought, “That nigger? . . . [Y]ou call him somebody?” (BL, 129). Proctor’s overall view of himself, coupled with his experiences in the community, transfer to how he views
himself in jail. One of the primary lessons that he must learn is the self-respect that “Gaines’ other male characters have learned” (EG, 29).

As Proctor begins to construct an identity separate from the labels assigned him, it is important that he recognize that he is unable to make the journey alone. In this regard, Munford’s presence conveniently serves a dual purpose: He is able to serve as a mentor, and he can offer Proctor a broader view of what manhood means in the larger context of Proctor’s life. Babb argues that Munford thus becomes Proctor’s “surrogate father, and through articulation of his own experience teaches Proctor that to be a man he must value his own life and, by extension, black life in general” (29). In helping Proctor understand the black man’s “manhood,” as well as his position in the penal system, Munford offers a complex theory of how a racist system restricts one’s growth and advancement:

“... 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. ... [T]his preacher going, ‘Mumbo-jumbo, mumbo-jumbo,’ but all the time he’s low’ing his mouth toward my little private. Nobody else don’t see him, but I catch him, and I haul ‘way back and hit him right in the eye. I ain’t no more than three months old but I give him a good one. ... If they miss you in the cradle, they catch 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.”

He continues:

“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. And if your back is strong, like your back is strong, they get you out so you can kill again. ... If you let him [Medlow, the plantation owner] get you out you won’t be a
man a second. He won’t ‘low it. ” (BL, 141)

Part of the irony of Munford’s theory rests in his own view of black men and their sense of worth and visibility. The lesson he imparts about manhood informs Proctor of the pride and nobility of remaining in jail and serving time for the crime against being bonded out by the plantation owner. Conversely, Munford adopts the language and thinking of the oppressor, saying “. . . you don’t go to the pen for the nigger you killed. . . . He ain’t worth it” (141). In the span of a few statements Proctor receives conflicting lessons on manhood and the value of black life from a man who has spent the majority of his life behind bars. Munford’s description of how the culture of racism deprives black men of their manhood is captured in a single statement: “. . . they grow niggers just to be killed, and they grow people just like you to kill ‘em . . . [T]hat’s all part of the culture. And every man got to play his part in the culture, or the culture don’t go on” (142).

As Munford completes the discourse on the revolving cycle of criminality, he signals a guard and begins the decades-old, weekly ritual of exiting the jail. Signaling the guard to free him from the cell suggests that he is unable or unwilling to honor his own impulses. He does feel, however, compelled to pass the wisdom of his experiences on to Proctor in the hope that Proctor will heed the calling and discontinue his descent into criminal behavior. Munford’s theory of racism impacts Proctor and allows Proctor to reflect upon his previous actions.

I tried to think about what everybody was doing at home. But hard as I tried, all I could think about was here. Maybe it was best if I didn’t think about outside. That could run you crazy. I had heard about people going crazy in jail. I tried to remember how it was when I was in jail before. It wasn’t like this if I could remember. Before, it was just a brawl – a fight. I had never stayed in more than a couple weeks. I had been in about a half dozen times, but never more than a week or two. This time it was different, though. (143)
Part of Proctor’s reflections reveal a growing sense of himself as a young man and not the expendable person he believes that he is: “Look at me, look at me. Strong. A man. A damn good man. A hard dick . . . a pile of muscles. . . . look at me – locked in here like a caged animal” (144). Just as Munford equates manhood to one’s sexual organ, so, too, does Proctor.

In “A Long Day in November” and “The Sky is Gray,” Sonny and James each have mentors who guide them to an awareness of themselves and their surroundings. While Proctor does not have a birth mother to protect and teach him, there is Munford who becomes, argues Karen Carmean, his surrogate father. Munford teaches him the importance of learning to acknowledge himself in a positive light. Munford’s “cradle” theory, coupled with his personal experiences of entering and exiting jails, reinforces the symbolic movement of the swinging gate in the story’s opening scene. Just as it is the responsibility of Sonny and James to embrace their respective mother’s teachings, it is Proctor’s responsibility to adopt the lessons offered him.

In a soliloquy to Proctor, Munford explains his own inability to remain free, lamenting that he “cant stay out of here [jail] to save my soul” (137):

> “Been going in and out of these jails here, I don’t know how long. . . . [F]orty, fifty years. Started out just like you – kilt a boy just like you did last night. Kilt him and got off – got off scot-free. My pappy worked for a white man who got me off. At first I didn’t know why he had done it – I didn’t think; all I knowed was I was free, and free is how I wanted to be. Then I got in trouble again, and again they got me off. I kept on getting in trouble, and they kept on getting me off. Didn’t wake up till I got to be nearly old as I’m is now.” (137)

Munford’s cellmate, Hattie, becomes part of the lesson he tries to instill in Proctor regarding manhood and personal responsibility. His references to Hattie as a “thing” and a “whore” underscore how he, too, internalizes and labels black men. Even though Munford offers Proctor lessons on character and morality, he also brings into the debate his own practice of defining and classifying. Gaines’ inclusion of Hattie suggests that
black masculinity embraces a complex and varied system of beliefs based on one’s experiences and personal preferences. To Munford, Hattie is not a person but an object to be ridiculed, dismissed, and ostracized. Hattie, maintains Carmean, has been destroyed “by a culture that systematically deprives him of manhood” (EJG, 147).

Munford concedes that the institution of racism benefits from the incessant incarcerations of men like him and Hattie, because, he argues, “... they need me to prove they human – just like they need that thing [Hattie] over there. They need us. Because without us, they don’t know what they is... [W]ith us around, they can see us and know what they ain’t. They ain’t us” (BL, 138). Munford sees himself in Proctor, and this reflection suggests that cultural knowledge of the elders must be passed to future generations of black men in order to ensure its survival. As Proctor sees himself as “just a nigger” (121), he is thoroughly entrenched in the perception of himself as a worthless black man. Only when he begins the process of understanding the psychological consequences of allowing himself to be continuously bonded out of jail will he see the value and importance of his own life.

Part of Proctor’s destructive cycle of behavior can be attributed to the absence of his father or a male figure in his life. The absent father motif figures in “A Long Day in November” and “The Sky is Gray,” and Sonny and James must depend upon their respective mothers to serve the dual role of mother and father. “Where is my father?” (BL, 147), Proctor asks himself. The question is critical as he attempts to understand where he fits in the world and why he constantly finds his freedom at risk. “Why my mama had to die? Why they brought me here and left me to struggle like this? ... I got nothing in this world but me” (147). Unlike the presence of the resolute women in the opening narratives, there is no biological mother present in “Three Men.” Gaines’ departure from the strong, maternal figure present in his major works suggest that men can be nurturers, but the cult of manhood discourages displays of affection. Emotional restraint is the core behavior of James in “The Sky is Gray.”

Hattie’s presence represents the first and only time in Gaines’ fiction that a gendered figure in the manner of Hattie is presented. The inclusion serves a number of purposes. The publication of Bloodline comes very early in Gaines’ career where the theme of manhood began to emerge. “The Turtles” (1956), Gaines’ first published short
story, “A Long Day in November,” and “Three Men” represent this early emergence. In Gaines’ first two novels, Catherine Carmier (1964) and Of Love and Dust (1967), love stories centered around the racial politics of the era do not carry the manhood theme as prominently as do his subsequent works. Catherine, the lead character in Catherine Carmier, and Marcus, the central figure in Of Love and Dust, are bound by southern codes of conduct that prevent co-mingling between Creoles and dark-skinned blacks and between blacks and whites. While each narrative is born out of Gaines’ upbringing and experiences on the plantation of his youth, thematically they remain grounded in issues specific to racial boundaries associated with Creoles, blacks, and whites.

Hattie, who has been called a woman by Munford, serves in the capacity of surrogate mother to Proctor. Even as Proctor routinely dismisses Hattie, repeatedly referring to her as a “freak,” Hattie continues to endear himself to Proctor. He is emotional, sympathetic, and receptive to Proctor’s plight. Hattie, contends Carmean, becomes Proctor’s “unwitting and disregarded ‘mother’” (EJG, 147). Although the negative dynamics against Hattie are evident between Munford and Proctor, Hattie’s warmth “creates a new definition of what it means to be a man” (Babb, 31). While Hattie’s influence is not openly received by Proctor, it “revises his notion of manhood” (31) and allows him to emerge with a more perceptive understanding of what constitutes manhood.

“Three Men” is not only a story about how lives intersect and bonds are formed, it is a narrative that declares how one generation has the explicit obligation to teach and strengthen another generation. As Munford and Hattie teach Proctor, it becomes Proctor’s responsibility to impart knowledge to those who come after him. The intimate setting of the jail cell is a patriarchal unit, and Proctor is essentially the baby of the family who must be nurtured by the elders until his time comes to pass on the torch of wisdom.

Gaines recounts how, in his own life, he was nurtured by parents who were determined to expose him to a life beyond the quarters of the Point Coupee Plantation in southern Louisiana and how relocation from the plantation saved him from the fate of other women and men:

“I was one of the lucky ones to get away, because so many of the other kids never did and they died right
here [in Point Coupee, Louisiana]. They died young. Many went to the prison, to Angola [State Prison in Louisiana]. Many of them died violently fighting among themselves. Many died of hearth attacks and strokes, around forty years old, men that I grew up around. I was one of the lucky ones. My folks took me away and educated me.” (Interview, 2006)

With the arrival of a new cellmate, a fourteen-year-old boy who has been arrested for stealing cakes, Proctor now has the opportunity to extend the lesson of Munford’s “suckling” theory. At this moment in the novel, the symbolism of Munford’s words is most applicable to Proctor’s understanding of his words: The institution of racism saps the strength of black men, and as a result they are unable to withstand the daily pressures of a racist world. Their lack of stamina and power stifles their growth and prevents them from moving forward. As a result they fall prey to forces outside their will.

Munford’s hypothesis regarding the preacher’s “low’ing his mouth to your little nipper [nipple]” (BL, 140-41) intersects racial and sexual politics. The “preacher” who is sent “to christen you” (140-41), Munford theorizes, symbolizes an already-present system of racism designed to weaken black men from birth. To help Proctor visualize his thesis, Munford injects gender into the argument. He constructs the image of an infant suckling a mother’s breast. When the infant has succeeded in fulfilling its nutritional needs, Munford concludes, it is safe for the baby to leave the mother’s breast. The objective is complete. One person, the sage criminal concludes, will be strengthened by the exercise, and the other will be weakened as a result of the action. Racism, Munford maintains, exacts an identical toll on black men: It strengthens and it weakens.

Manhood, he insists, is defined by a man’s sexual organ. When the organ is “drained” of its potency by a racist system of oppression, the black man becomes vulnerable and subject to his own follies. Matriarchal and patriarchal forces at work during black, male infancy are quickly overtaken by a larger, external force as black men grow into adulthood. As Munford, the surrogate father, exits his “son’s” life, his leaving reflects Proctor’s own father’s absence in his life. With Munford no longer a part of
Proctor’s incarceration, Proctor is now free to mentor and serve in a surrogate capacity to the newest arrival.

As Proctor’s parents are replaced by Hattie and Munford, the “absent” parents of the new cellmate are now replaced by Proctor who exhibits a tender and caring nature. Proctor, a wounded soul himself who has “nothing in this world” (147), has a small reversal of fortune. He now has the chance to care, literally and figuratively, for another wounded soul. His moral conscience now extends to a member of the future generation of young black men who must be taught lessons in manhood and accountability.

The element of family, contends Babb, “manifests itself as three men share the lessons of three generations on becoming a man and maintaining self-respect in a society that encourages neither for a black man” (EG, 31). In Gaines’ repertoire the “man theme” runs alongside the motif of “standing tall.” When Proctor makes the decision to stand tall and serve his time in jail he “. . . cried and cried and cried” (BL, 151). His emotional breakdown is critical on two levels: It departs from his earlier refusal to cry, and it signals that he is ready to move forward and claim ownership of his actions. He is no longer bound to pretentious behavior. Even though his freedom is physically restricted, he is psychologically liberated.

His crying is also a statement of the power and control he feels is necessary for his continuing evolvement and maturity. While admitting to himself that he “. . . wished I knowed a good person. I would be good if I knowed a good person. I swear to God I would be good” (149), he surmises that his irresponsible conduct is tied to his lack of a structured environment and a healthy relationship with a member of the community. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that he is ready to move forward and assume responsibility for his actions:

Even if Medlow came to get me, I wasn’t leaving with him. I was go’n do like Munford said. . . . I didn’t want to have to pull cover over my head every time a white man did something to a black boy – I wanted to stand. Because they never let you stand if they got you out. They didn’t let Jack [a man in the community who committed a similar crime] – and I had never heard of them
leaving everybody else stand, either. (152)

Admitting that his decision to stand tall and withstand the physical injuries he knows are forthcoming from the jailers, he declares that he “. . . felt good. I laid there feeling good. I felt so good I wanted to sing. I sat up on the bunk and lit a cigarette. I had never smoked a cigarette like I smoked that one. I drew deep, deep, till my chest got big. It felt good deep down in me. I jumped to the floor feeling good” (152). Proctor’s expanded chest symbolizes the pride he feels by his decision to remain in jail and accept his punishment “like a man,” and his “jumping to the floor” represents his stance as man. The decision to remain in jail gives him ownership of himself and provides him the mental strength to transfer this sense of authority and pride to the young boy. While Proctor understands that it is now his turn to make an impact, he still ponders his decision:

What was I going to do when Medlow came? Was I
going to change my mind and go with him? And if I
didn’t go with Medlow, I surely had to go with T. J. and
his boys. Was I going to be able to take the beatings night
after night? . . . [W]as I going to be able to take it? (155)

Proctor is in a position to impart wisdom in the manner that it has been passed to him. His incarceration becomes the force that leads to his psychological freedom. Behind bars he will stand tall, admit his faults, and confront his fears. The price of freedom on someone else’s terms, he reasons, is greater than the cost of incarceration on his own. By deciding to remain in jail he accepts his fate and begins control of his future, making sure that the “little gates that swung in and out” (121) will have less chance to do so in the future.
“Bloodline”

Crossing the Threshold of Racial Politics:
Copper Laurent’s Journey from Invisibility to Power

As Gaines advances the theme of manhood, dignity, and identity politics in his *Bloodline* volume, the title story, published in 1968, takes on a more urgent bearing: the effects of the splintered family upon black men’s psyche. Copper Laurent, the central figure in “Bloodline,” might initially be seen as a tragic “mulatto figure” because of his mixed-raced heritage. Yet the author’s treatment of Copper’s legacy allows the young man to emerge beyond the traditional characterization of the poor, disenfranchised, biracial child often depicted in literary works such as Kate Chopin’s short story “Desiree’s Baby” and Williams Wells Brown’s novel *Clotel; or The President’s Daughter*. As the son of a racist plantation overseer and black sharecropper, Copper is a psychologically scarred man who navigates between two cultures: a world of white privilege and class, which he literally desires to enter -- on his own terms -- and one of subservient labor, stunted economics, and racial warfare, of which he is a part.

Paradoxically, to gain entrance into the former he must literally acquiesce to one of the Old South’s most prevailing, racist practices: Blacks who wish to enter the private residences of whites must do so through a back door. Frank Laurent, Copper’s paternal uncle, mandates the back-door order. Not only is he historically bound by segregationist rules that dictate the practice, he feels morally obligated to adhere to the practice as well. How to Copper’s refusal to subordinate himself to the practice -- while maintaining a sense of pride and dignity in the face of adversity -- is one of Gaines’ signature motifs that transports itself throughout his canon.

Even though the initial struggle between Copper and Frank Laurent centers on the manner of Copper’s physical entrance to the Laurent home, the underlying rift between the two men operates through the rubric of change versus a static social order. As Karen Carmean notes, “. . . the struggle between the uncle and nephew isn’t so much about differences as about likeness” (Ernest J. Gaines, 150). Frank Laurent sees himself as the voice of historical authority while Copper views himself as a symbol of emerging power.
Copper’s psychosis, which began during his childhood and advanced in his young adult life, serves a dual function: It enables him to dismiss many forms of rational thinking, but it also empowers him to construct an identity according to his own making.

As Gaines was greatly influenced by Faulkner, the resemblance to plot developments in the stories involving Faulkner’s Sutpen and Compson families is evident in “Bloodline.” Of Faulkner’s influence, Gaines says:

“... We [Faulkner and I] write about the South, the Mississippi borders, Louisiana. Some of the same kind of characters you’d find in Faulkner’s small towns, hanging around the storefronts, working in the fields, you’d find the same sort of characters in Louisiana. Faulkner made me concentrate more on my characters. He showed me how similar they were, white or black characters in a field. . . . [W]hen it came down to writing about peasant life, life in the fields, or life in a small town among the very poor people . . . Faulkner had that kind of influence. . . .” (Interview, 2006)

The theme of father and son separation, however, is not a Faulknerian influence. While Gaines credits Faulkner with affecting his writing, he discounts Faulkner’s philosophical influence, opting instead to find his own literary voice:

“I definitely don’t go along with Faulkner’s philosophy; his description of the characters, yes. He’s a master at capturing that southern dialogue, whether it’s black or white, but it was a certain level of dialogue that Faulkner was interested in. When it came to philosophy and when it came to my characters reacting, it was my judgment about how my characters would react, not Faulkner’s. . . . [T]here were a lot of similarities, but when you get down to the nitty-gritty, there were some differences there.” (Interview, 2006)
The motif of father and son estrangement is particularly acute in “Bloodline,” because Copper is the product of abandonment by two men of diverse racial, economic, and social backgrounds. On the one hand is Walter Laurent, the now-deceased overseer of the Laurent Plantation, who is Copper’s white, biological father. In Walter Laurent’s lifetime he never acknowledged Copper as a legitimate offspring, even though the knowledge of his infidelities among the community of plantation laborers was widespread. On the other end of the paternal spectrum is Copper’s black stepfather – nameless throughout the narrative – who quickly expels Copper from the family home upon the death of Copper’s mother. The stepfather was, according to Copper, “. . . tired of supporting a white man’s child” (BL, 212).

As Copper battles the fault lines between two cultural worlds, the theme of miscegenation remains central to the development of the narrative. In fact, the stepfather’s reference to Copper’s ethnicity – as well as his (Copper’s) literal dismissal from the family unit – serves as the catalyst for his journey to power. Copper claims that he “always knew” (211) who his father was but also acknowledges that he “couldn’t say a thing about it” (212), because to do so would break an unwritten, racial policy of speaking out against the casual rape of black women by white overseers. It would also invite hardship among plantation workers and residents of the community. Speaking openly of sexual liaisons between the powerless and the powerful could, he claims, “have gotten me in trouble, and probably gotten my mother in more trouble” (212). Life, in Copper’s world, is as much a matter of humbly acknowledging the sexual exploitation of black women as it is learning to survive against all odds.

The fieldworkers who cultivate the Laurent land contribute indirectly to the sexual exploitation of female plantation workers by remaining silent. It is to their economic advantage to refrain from speaking out against the landowner on behalf of the women, because to do so would jeopardize their physical place on the land, disrupt their own family unit, and cause strife and turmoil among members of the community. While “Bloodline” is the only short story in Gaines’ repertoire which directly addresses the topic of miscegenation, Catherine Carmier (1964), a love story involving Bradley, a dark-skinned black man, and Catherine, a beautiful Creole woman whose father rejects all dark-skinned people, comes closest to addressing the topic. The narrative trajectory of
Bloodline balances the youthful adventures of Sonny (“A Long Day in November”) and James (“The Sky is Gray”) with the insight gained by Proctor (“Three Men”) to chronicle the tumultuous life of Copper Laurent. Gaines’ treatment of the splintered family unit and the masculine sphere comes full circle.

Unlike Sonny in “A Long Day in November,” whose father proudly acknowledges him and hopes to reunite the family, Copper does not emerge from a splintered unit with the hope of a fairytale ending of reunification. His family unit is already psychologically and physically fragmented. While Gaines does not present evidence in the novel that Copper overtly resents his stepfather, nothing suggests that Copper is emotionally attached to him. The stepfather does not play a major role in the story, but his impact upon Copper is felt throughout the narrative. Copper never references his stepfather by name, alluding to him instead as his “mother’s husband” (212). The generic phrase suggests that he is detached from him and seeks a paternal influence elsewhere.

The stepfather’s namelessness also implies that there are a multitude of faceless and unidentified black men who abandon their sons and families on an everyday basis but continue to function undisturbed in their own lives. Gaines in part attributes this level of neglect to the historical legacy of slavery wherein families in general – and fathers and sons in particular – were separated on the slave auction block and have been unable, since that time, to sustain a relationship. The passage of time, theorizes Gaines, has not fostered a psychological or physical reunification and therein lies the familial disconnect. Copper’s stepfather’s conduct – the expulsion of Copper from the home – reopens a “wound of neglect” caused by his birth father and makes his emotional healing much more difficult.

While Copper does not possess an apparent hatred of his stepfather, he does, however, harbor a negative image of him. He remarks that his “supposed-to-be-father. had been too nutless to say I wasn’t his while we lived in the South” (212) but acknowledges that his mother’s “. . . husband’s name was the name I carried up until recently” (212). Copper’s continued refusal to use his stepfather’s surname further suggests that the decision to abandon the stepfather’s name speaks not only to his
determination to claim an identity elsewhere but is a symbolic action that thrusts the abandonment back to the person who has relinquished the responsibilities of fatherhood.

Copper’s need to proclaim that he knows who his “real” father is while at the same time rejecting his “supposed-to-be-father” (212) further suggests that at a young age he internalized notions of manhood and fatherhood and the inherent responsibilities one should take when assuming the roles. The instant he discards his stepfather’s name and literally strikes out on his own he begins to feel a sense of power and validation. It is interesting to note that Copper refrains from using a more refined adjective to identify his stepfather’s inability to display character and nobility in his association with him.

He sexualizes his stepfather’s lack of integrity, which suggests that his pseudo-father, like his real-life father, lacked the paternal fortitude to withstand the myriad duties and obligations that true manhood requires and represents, choosing abandonment over responsibility. The reference also alludes to the sexualization, rejection, disregard, and disrespect of Copper’s mother by Walter Laurent. In conversation with Frank Laurent, his father’s brother, Copper recounts a childhood memory in which he observes his mother and father engaged in a sexual act:

“... one day in the field we were picking up potatoes. I had gone to the bayou to get some water out of the barrel. When I came back to the row where my mother and I were working, she wasn’t there. I asked where she was, and a woman – I forget who she was – started laughing at me. I walked away crying, looking for my mother. I found them in another patch of ground. Walter Laurent on top of her. They didn’t see me, but that night I told her one day I was going to kill him. That’s why we moved from here.” (212)

As he views what he perceives to be an assault upon his mother his sense of emasculation – because of his inability to defend and protect her – leads to a feeling of inadequacy. Copper’s emasculation begins early in life and retains an emotional hold upon him as he matures. “A black woman,” claims Felix, the longtime servant of the Laurent household and the story’s narrator, “no matter who she was, didn’t have a chance
if he [Walter Laurent] wanted her. He didn’t care if it was in the field, in the quarters, the store or that house” 162). “That house” is the same house which Frank Laurent now controls and whose back door Copper refuses to enter. In his youthful threat to kill his father, Copper replaces one notion of manhood with another concept of what it should be: taking responsibility, caring, and nurturing a child who has not yet reached adulthood, directing him to a safe and responsible place in society, and acknowledging him in life. He recognizes that his age did not deter his ouster from his parents’ home in his assertion that he was “fourteen years old then. A fourteen-year-old black child out on his own” (212).

Like the nineteen-year-old Proctor Lewis (“Three Men”) whose mother is dead and whose father is absent, Copper’s dismissal leads him to acknowledge that he, too, has “not a soul in the world to turn to, not one” (BL, 212). As the trajectory of the coming-of-age theme in “A Long Day in November” aligns with Proctor Lewis’ and Copper’s tales, Gaines’ treatment of the familiar motif of manhood becomes more prominent. While Proctor can claim a surrogate family in the protective sphere of Hattie and Munford Bazille, Copper does not have a unit of support. As the lone figure unable to claim a parental heritage and paternal birthright that he can rightfully acknowledge, his need for patriarchal legitimacy is understandable. While Amalia, Copper’s mother’s sister and the Laurens’ longtime house servant, voices her opposition to Frank Laurent’s mandate that her nephew obey “the rules,” she is powerless to effect change. She speaks, but her voice – in the grand sphere of subservience – is muted.

Copper must look outside himself for self-validation. His abandonment, asserts Babb, leaves him “a solitary character groping for self-identification” (Ernest Gaines, 32). His splintered family, Babb further maintains, “provides no sanctuary along a quest for self complicated by being neither black no white” (33). While Copper is not considered a “victim” of the “one-drop” rule, a colloquial term which emerged during the era of the Jim Crow South which classified anyone with one black ancestor, regardless of how far back, as black, he is a direct recipient of some of the consequences of the classification.
Copper’s declaration of his nomadic lifestyle suggests that he understands the fractious relationship between father and son and the ensuing damage it causes. He typifies his wanderings and consciously aligns himself with the countless number of “suffering” and displaced men who are, in his estimation, “without birthrights” (BL, 213).

“For the last ten years I’ve been everywhere. . . . I’ve seen a little bit of everything in this world, but suffering more than anything else. . . . [T]here’re millions just like me. Maybe not my color, but without homes, without birthrights, just like me. And who is to blame? . . . [M]en like my father. Men like Walter Laurent. . . . [T]he suffering, the suffering, the suffering.” (213)

Clearly, Copper, as does Proctor Lewis who comments similarly in his cell, is affected by the loss of his mother, the absence of his father, and the home life to which he had become partially accustomed. His disillusionment with life manifests itself, he imagines, in the collective voices of black men whose lives are also disrupted by similar circumstances. His level of frustration is evident as he declares: “I’ve been in all the cities. . . . [Y]es, and I’ve been in prison. How many times have I heard weeping in those cells. . . . We didn’t even ask to be born. I, myself, was conceived in a ditch. . . .” (213).

As Copper converses with Frank following his journey to the plantation, Frank Laurent positions himself as a victim of racial politics and cultural warfare. Though he claims to have suffered, his “suffering” does not affect his adherence to the rules of law. As he has previously insisted to his in-house servants that Copper will “come through that back door, and he’ll be glad to come through that back door” (176), he now begins, in light of Copper’s refusal to budge, to reveal a humanistic side. While he feels a guilty compulsion to change, he also feels that he must remain true to the historical legacy of the times as well as the racist practices of the Laurent dynasty. At the servants’ earlier suggestion that Frank allow Copper to “slip in tonight sometime” (199), Frank expounds upon the unyielding law of the land:

“Even if they [the Cajuns] didn’t lynch him, I wouldn’t let him come in through that front door. Neither him, nor you
[Felix] nor her [Amalia] over there. And to me she is only the second woman I’ve had the good fortune of knowing whom I can call a lady. But she happens to be black, Felix, and because she’s black she’ll never enter this house through that door. Not while I’m alive.

He continues to explain the explicit nature of “the rules” by which he will abide:

“Because, you see, Felix, I didn’t write the rules. I came and found them, and I shall die and leave them. They will be changed, of course; they will be changed, and soon, I hope. But I will not be the one to change them.” (199)

In Frank’s trip to the plantation, Copper’s “looking down at his uncle” (214) – as he sits on the gallery – serves three purposes: It symbolizes victory over Frank as his uncle has “reported” to him (and not vice versa), it empowers him as he has remained true to his word that he would not enter through the back door, and it gives him presence and a strong sense of visibility as he momentarily controls a representative symbol of racial injustice. In Copper’s anger and state of delusion he refers to himself as “General.” He subtly refers to the Laurent dynasty as “rapists, murderers, plunderers – and they hide behind the law. The law they created themselves” (213). By assigning himself the title of “General,” he positions himself more prominently than any Laurent. Just as he literally “looks down” on Frank Laurent, the self-imposed title of “General” provides him a sense of racial superiority “over” a representative of the racist system of oppression. “The world made me a General,” (214) he says. Even as he accentuates his blackness, he still seeks to enter the Laurent world of privilege and class.

As Frank speaks to Copper about carrying “the burden of this world on your shoulders,” he also acknowledges for the first time the emotional burdens he, too, carries as a Laurent. The weight of upholding racist practices, which he claims to abhor, has taken its toll, and he admits the extent of the damage:

“My brother, your father, was wrong. Not only with your mother, but with many other women – white and black alike. White and black men he also destroyed. Destroyed
them physically, destroyed them mentally. I, myself
have suffered from his errors as much as you, as much as
any other man has...” (215).

In Frank’s eroding health, Copper is acutely aware of the major force his uncle’s
death will represent for the plantation workers: His niece will adhere to class conventions
that dictate the ouster of the workers and the parceling of the Laurent land to Cajun
sharecroppers, resulting in displaced and splintered families on the plantation. While
Frank articulates his intentions to “do all I can to make up for what he [his brother,
Walter Laurent] did to these here in the quarters” (216), he still maintains the racial
stronghold that characterizes the family’s heritage:

“I’m going to defend this place with all my strength.
I’m going to defend it with my dying breath – to
keep it exactly as it is. And if you come back here again,
or with your Army, before the law of the land has been
changed to give you those ‘birthrights’ you’ve been talking
so much about, I would shoot you down the same as I
would a mad dog. After I’m dead, laws won’t matter to
me. You and Greta Jean [his niece] can fight over this
piece of rot as long as you both live.” (216)

He continues to expound upon the historical nature of “the rules” and why he feels
compelled to adhere to them:

“But as long as I can draw breath, it stays as it is.
I did not write these rules and laws you’ve been
talking about; I came here and found them, just
as you did. And neither one of us is going to change
them, not singly. . . . If you can’t live by those
rules, then you better get the hell away from here now.” (216)

Copper’s rejection by his black stepfather makes his need of the Laurent birthright
much more urgent. Not only does he seek a real and true identity, he seeks a physical
justification for existing. In “A Long Day in November,” for example, the culmination of
Sonny’s day comforts him and leaves him fully engulfed in the safety and security of
home and community. Copper does not possess this level of security and therefore feels justified in seeking a means to achieve it. From his previous claim of being unable to speak openly of the truth of his heritage, he now possesses, in the wisdom of his maturity, the courage to face a new challenge of his own construction. His double rejection creates the physical and intellectual energy needed to confront established social and cultural mores of the Old South. Even though there is no clear explanation of the origin of Copper’s mental instability, the reader can assume that his derangement is due in part to his ouster from the family home at a young age and events and circumstances associated with his listless wanderings over the years.

As Frank Laurent acknowledges that the life he has lived is slowly coming to an end, he also recognizes the possibility of change is a historical inevitability. As Copper attempts to secure his legacy by acquiring the Laurent birthright, he realizes that bloodlines do not necessarily translate into love, honor, and respect. Nor, he concludes, do they supersede rationality. Recognizing the dichotomy of bloodlines and kinship, Copper proclaims at the end of his journey, “I’ll be back, Uncle. And I’ll take my share” (217). He declares with great pride that he “won’t beg for it, I won’t ask for it; I’ll take it. I’ll take it or I’ll bathe this whole plantation in blood” (217). The strength and repetition of Copper’s claim – “I’ll take it. I’ll take it . . .” – symbolizes his strong sense of self as well as it represents his public stand against the old plantation ways and the South’s resistance to change. Copper’s announcement also indicates that he needs nor seeks no one’s permission to be his own man. He is aware of who he is and is more than prepared to unleash the power within. In his world there is no place for identity negotiations. Frank Laurent’s declining health symbolizes a dying culture in the Old South.

Like Munford Bazille (“Three Men”) who offers Proctor Lewis a rambling analysis of the emasculation of black men, Copper offers Frank Laurent a critique of the “barbarity” of racism, injustice, and “the law,” ordered and perpetuated by the institution of racism:

“Those are your creations, Uncle – the chains and sticks. You created them four hundred years ago, and you’re still using them up to this day. You
created them. But they were only a fraction of your barbarity. . . . You used the rope and the tree to hang him. You used the knife to castrate him while he struggled with the rope to catch his breath. You used fire to make him squirm even more, because the hanging and castration still wasn’t enough amusement for you. Then you used something else – another creation of yours – that thing you called the law. It was written by you for you and your kind, and any many who was not of your kind had to break it sooner or later. . . I only used a fraction of your creations.” (BL, 209)

As Copper’s verbal grandiosity reaches a crescendo he continues to explain the psychological effects of the system’s “creations,” using the image of a “stick and chain” to forge a dominant impression against the reality of whips and iron shackles used during slavery to constrain women and men:

“You have imbedded the stick and the chain in their minds for so long, they can’t hear anything else. . . . From now on I’ll use the simplest words. Simple words, Uncle; a thing you thought they would never understand.” (209)

As the sole General in an army of one, Copper no longer depends upon others to protect, validate, and acknowledge his existence. He is in charge of his life and is able to move forward with dignity and pride. His use of the future tense – in announcing to Frank that he “will come back . . . and when I do, she [Amalia] will never have to go through your back door ever again” (217) – signals that his aspirations, though strong, worthy, and admirable are not yet, by narrative’s end, realized. Although Copper does not have the support that a unified family can offer, he possesses the inner strength to confront future obstacles with pride, dignity, and respect. The open-ending of “Bloodline” does not bring closure to Copper’s quest to walk literally front and center through Frank Laurent’s door of racial inequality. It does, however, show that he is waging his journey to power and visibility on his own terms.
“Just Like a Tree”
A Gathering of Voices: Community as Cultural Narrative

Just like a tree that’s
planted ‘side the water. Oh, I shall not be moved.
--- from an old Negro spiritual

As the concluding story in Bloodline, “Just Like a Tree” (1962) is, as Babb asserts, “both finale and prelude” (EG, 24). Gaines offers a medley of voices which speak to the familiar themes present in each of the collection’s four narratives: the quest for human dignity, personal responsibility, pride, and self-respect. In “Just Like a Tree,” however, he does more. He delivers a gender-inclusive historical cornucopia which allows a diverse cast of characters to “have their say” as Aunt Fe, the object of the communal tribute, prepares to leave the quarters on a journey North. As the stylistic precursor to The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971) and A Gathering of Old Men (1983), the story also serves as the collection’s communal folktale.

As each of the collection’s preceding narratives speak to literal and figurative movements in dignity, “Just Like a Tree” aptly concludes with Aunt Fe’s final journey, conducted – as is Copper Laurent’s journey in “Bloodline” – on her own terms. Each narrative voice contributes to the significance of her presence in the community, and each speaker is part of the cultural fabric that contributes to her position as communal icon. As the central figures in the previous narratives have been male, Gaines suggests, by now casting Aunt Fe in the centermost position, that no matter the daily obstacles faced by young black boys and older black men, most often a woman’s strength and character unifies and defines a community.

By repeatedly invoking Aunt Fe’s name, Leola, the story’s first female narrator, declares the significance of Aunt Fe’s place in the community, whether the relationship is through kinship or community association: “Aunt Fe, Aunt Fe, Aunt Fe, Aunt Fe, the name’s been ‘mongst us just like us own family name. Just like the name o’ God. Like the name of town – the city. Aunt Fe, Aunt Fe, Aunt Fe, Aunt Fe” (BL, 227). The emotional and psychological connection to Aunt Fe shows how her presence in the community also houses its collective identity. As much as Aunt Fe is a cultural monument in the community, she is also a spiritual representation of its members. The
repetition of Aunt Fe’s name implies that faith and determination are personal guideposts that direct the paths of the women protagonists in his body of work. In “The Sky is Gray,” for example, the mother’s strength of character determines the outcome of the journey with her son, James. Similarly, the wife’s fierceness and uncompromising ways in “A Long Day in November” factor into the family’s reunification. The communal tribute to Aunt Fe represents the respect, adulation, and pride that she commands. She marks the evolution of the generational figure represented by the young mothers in “A Long Day in November” and “The Sky is Gray.”

The metaphorical use of a tree throughout the story suggests a comparison between Aunt Fe’s leaving the sanctity of the quarters to the migratory pattern of blacks leaving the South. Her uprooting personifies the lives of blacks forcibly removed from their homeland and settled in an unfamiliar region. Aunt Clo, one of Aunt Fe’s closest friends, compares the communal matriarch’s prospective leaving to a tree whose roots are so deeply embedded that removing her would be like:

“... wrapping a chair round a tree and jecking and jecking, and then shifting the chain little bit and jecking and jecking some in that direction. . . . [S] till it might not be loose enough and you have to back the tractor up some and fix the chain round the tree again and start jecking all over.” (BL, 235)

Aunt Clo’s statement about “wrapping a chain round a tree” (235) alludes to the physical chains of slavery that bound captives for transport to an unfamiliar place, as well as suggests the historical resistance to movement from one culture to another. Aunt Fe is the communal force in the quarters, and “moving her [Aunt Fe] from here,” claims Leola, “is like moving a tree you been used to in your front yard all your life” (227). “Just Like a Tree,” says Gaines, “is a story of protest” (Interview, 2006). The narrative parallels the quiet, dignified protest of the mother in “The Sky is Gray” against the racism and economic conditions of her circumstances. In “Bloodline” Copper Laurent’s mother protests the sexual abuse by the overseer by opting to move from the quarters following Copper’s comment about killing his father, Walter Laurent.

The voice of Anne-Marie Duvall, heir to the Duval plantation, is equally significant, because she is the only white narrator in the story. Her dialogue underscores
the racial complexities that exist between blacks and whites. While her voice does not carry the same cultural weight as Leola’s, Aunt Clo’s, and Aunt Lou’s, it does carry the historical legacy of the master and servant relationship. Like Walter Laurent’s relationship to Amalia, the decades-long house servant, Anne-Marie’s relationship to Aunt Fe has survived an ever-changing social and political era. Because Anne-Marie only “sees” what she wants to see, she does not feel compelled to try to comprehend the larger picture of Aunt Fe’s impending move.

Anne-Marie’s treacherous journey to the community gathering, delayed by thunderstorms, symbolizes the difficult existence that the residents endure on a daily basis. Unlike the plantation workers who understand their plight and economic conditions, she is “completely blind” (BL, 243) to their hardships and suffering. She behaves out of obligation, does not understand the importance or necessity of Aunt Fe’s move, and comprehends even less why she must attend the tribute. Only a sense of white guilt compels her to attend the gathering. As Walter Laurent in “Bloodline” operates under a sense of historical legacy, so, too, does Anne-Marie:

“He’s [her husband, Edward] right. I should not go out in this kind of weather. But what he does not understand is I must. Father definitely would have gone if he were alive. Grandfather definitely would have gone, also. And therefore, I must. Why? I cannot answer why. Only I must go.” (BL, 240)

She takes great pleasure in her inability to comprehend the complexities of the racial and cultural dynamics that separate the races and the chance of becoming more informed remains a futile exercise. She has not understood in the past and now asks herself “. . . why should I try to understand it now?” (240). That she continues to remain uninformed suggests that the larger community of whites are, too, unwilling or unable to understand the social and psychological ramifications of cultural displacement.

While Anne-Marie’s naiveté is disengaging, the power of her voice rests in her aloofness and the seemingly innocent questions she asks herself regarding the progress of blacks:

“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 it, I pity them. Oh, how I pity them.” (241)

She prefers “pitying them” as opposed to trying to understand the historical place of their existence and the economic place in which they live and work. Her speech is derogatory, and she privately references the assembled members of the community as “every one of them,” “niggers,” “an old one [“nigger”],” and “one old darky” (242-3). While her tone and speech are condescending, she speaks the language of the racist majority. She is, as Babb points out, “comfortable in her ignorance” (EG, 41). Her presence at the gathering supersedes any previous accolades bestowed upon Aunt Fe by the community, and as she enters the room everyone “start scattering everywhere” (BL, 242). At Aunt Fe’s direction the assembled guests make way for her royal entrance: “Y’all move; let her get to that fire. Y’all move. Move, now. Let her warm herself” (242). Anne Marie is looked upon as a brave warrior for coming out “in weather like this” (242) to bid “one old darky” (243) farewell, and her presence becomes the most significant aspect of the evening.

That she purchases a 79-cent scarf as a going-away gift to Aunt Fe – who, according to her husband, “cooked for your daddy” and “. . . . nursed you when your mama died” (239) – speaks to her overseer status with Aunt Fe. As Aunt Fe proudly accepts the present she tells the assembled crowd: “Y’all look. . . . [Y]’all look. Ain’t it the prettiest little scarf y’all ever did see? Y’all look. . . . I go’n put it on right now. . . . I gon’n put it on right now, my lady” (243). Just as Amalia in “Bloodline” continues to wear an apron, the garment which signifies the servant status in Frank Laurent’s home, Aunt Fe proudly “unfolds it [the scarf] and ties it round her head and looks up at everybody and smiles” (243). Aunt Fe is no longer in the employ of the Duvall plantation, but the dynamics of the master-servant relationship are still culturally entrenched. In the power and presence of the moment the two women display great affection for each other. Anne-Marie is emotionally connected to Aunt Fe, and the final scene between the two women show the maternal attachment they have for each other:

“. . . . I look into that wrinkled old face again, and I must go back down again. And I lay my head in that bony old
lap, and I cry and I cry – I don’t know how long. And I feel those old fingers, like death itself, passing over my hair and my neck. I don’t know how long I kneel there crying, and when I stop, I get out of there as fast as I can.” (243)

Anne-Marie’s “kneeling down beside her [Aunt Fe]” (243) suggests not only a spiritual connection between the two women; it reinforces Aunt Fe’s strong, spiritual presence in the community. Their fondness for each other endures despite the racial barriers between them. As Aunt Fe has served the Duvall plantation well, Anne Marie’s presence as the lone “white lady coming through all of this for one old darky” (243) gives, in Anne Marie’s perspective, “legitimacy” to the gathering: “It is all right for them to come from all over the plantation, from all over the area, in all kinds of weather. This is to be expected of them. But a white lady, a white lady. They must think we white people don’t have any kind of feeling” (243). The irony of her statement is seemingly lost on her as she has previously lamented: “What do they want? Do they know what they want?” (241).

Clearly, Anne-Marie is emotionally affected by Aunt Fe’s impending move, but just as clearly she fails to understand the necessity of the journey. Aunt Fe is the psychological, emotional, and spiritual presence of the community, and Anne-Marie’s narrative speaks to the racial tensions that not only exist on the plantation but also on a much larger scale. Out of the historical circumstances through which the two Souths, one black and one white, are intertwined, and out of which the black culture has developed Anne Marie’s voice resonates with truth.

As Aunt Fe prepares to sing her “termination song” (249), her instructions foretell her final action. Just like a tree, firmly rooted with outstretched branches, she has been a strong, resolute warrior in the community, undeterred by forces outside her control. She has weathered the storms of racism, oppression, and all of the elements that have conspired against her and the people who have come to pay their respects, and she has extended herself to those in need. Just like older branches protect new undergrowth, she has been the expanding force of knowledge and protection in the community to those who have come behind her. In her final gift to the people she loves and cherishes, she
wills her own death. In Aunt Lou’s observation, Aunt Fe “just sit there ‘side the fireplace like she don’t mind going at all” (247).

It is fitting that Gaines concludes the collection with the voices of women in the community. While Aunt Fe does not offer a sustained dialogue in the narrative, her presence represents the voices of the major women figures in the preceding stories and embodies their spirit. In the absence of Proctor Lewis’s and Copper Laurent’s mothers, Aunt Fe’s presence resonates in their spirit. Just as Copper Laurent conducts his life on his own terms, so, too, does Aunt Fe. If she must leave the community that she loves, she will do it on her own time and in the manner she sees most fitting. As the culminating narrative in Bloodline, “Just Like a Tree” embraces the collection’s themes of self-respect, validation, dignity, and pride, and in her death will her voice and presence resonate for generations to come. As the collection’s communal folktale, the narrative speaks not only to the historical and cultural importance of shared experiences. It serves as the literary framework for Gaines’ future work.
CHAPTER II: IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE

Onward Christian Soldier: In My Father’s House and
Reverend Phillip Martin’s Road to Redemption

Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto
men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.
--- St. Matthew, Chapter 23, verse 28
New Testament

Written from the omniscient point of view, In My Father’s House, Gaines’ signature novel of father and son separation, opens with a reference to the Reverend Phillip J. Martin, the charismatic preacher and community activist in the St. Adrienne parish. He is idolized by the residents, and in their perspective he is “Washington-politics ready.” As the voice of the disenfranchised he places himself on a pedestal and enjoys a heightened esteem created in part by the community. By assigning Phillip the title of “Reverend” and the first name “Martin,” Gaines implies Phillip’s association with the good deeds and righteousness of the civil rights leader Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. As much as the novel is about the separation of fathers and sons and its effect upon the family, In My Father’s House is also a story constructed around contrastive figures in the community who help shape the social and political agenda of its members.

As the narrative opens the reader is introduced to Robert X, a young, unkempt stranger who suddenly appears in the St. Adrienne parish on a mission to locate his father. He is described as a “thin, brown-skin young man . . . scraggly and hungry-looking” (4) with “little twisted knots of hair” and “deep, blood-shot” eyes (4). The early introduction of Phillip and Robert X – and the ominous atmosphere of Robert’s arrival – forewarns the reader of the imminent crisis between the two men. Robert – whose abbreviated presence in the novel is one of the narrative’s flaws – contrasts Phillip Martin’s strong and dignified image. Babb describes Robert X as an “outcast, tormented by a past and lacking the identification a paternal lineage represents” (Ernest Gaines, 99).

At a political gathering at Phillip’s home Phillip, also known as “King Martin,” (FH, 20), is presented as stately and commanding.
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 well-trimmed mustache were
just beginning to show some gray. (34)

His physical attractiveness is an asset recognized by the women in the community:
He was a very handsome, dark-skinned man, admired by
women black and white. The black women spoke
openly of their admiration for him, the white
women said it around people they could trust. He
was very much respected by most of the people who
knew him. (34)

As St. Adrienne’s most prominent black male, his psychological grip on the residents is
unyielding. At the gathering “the people had begun to applaud Phillip, and he raised his
hands for silence . . . [T]he people could not stop applauding him. . . ” (35).

Even though he is pastor of the Solid Rock Baptist Church he sees himself first
and foremost as an activist for the people. James Henry Harris argues in The Courage to
Lead that the African American church is “still the most recursive incubator and
facilitating center for the development of responsible African American leaders” (3). The
designation of “leader” requires commitment and is not simply built upon a “ceremonial
and ornamental role in the church” (17). Phillip’s marriage to a younger woman extends
his public image, and the union suggests that he is a part – or wishes to be a part – of the
younger generation’s inner circle. In order for him to bridge old-school beliefs with new-
school ideologies he believes that he must assume a youthful, contemporary persona in
the community.

Part of his acclaim shows in the home he shares with his family: It is a place of
prestige and grandeur. His estate paradoxically divides him from the people who worship
him:

The minister lived about a quarter of a mile
farther back of town. His ranch-style brick
house was the most expensive and elegant
owned by a black family in Sr. Adrienne. The
house sat behind a thick green lawn of St. Augustine grass about fifty feet away from the road. A driveway covered with sea-shells ran along the right side of the yard, ending under a canopy beside the house. The minister’s big Chrysler and his wife’s small station wagon were parked there. (FH, 28)

Phillip’s wife is introduced as a quiet, reserved woman who often goes unnoticed:

Alma Martin, a small brown-skinned woman, wore a long dark-green dress with a black patent-leather belt round the waist. She was only thirty-five years old, but the calm, passive face and dark clothes made her look much older. She spoke so quietly that they could hardly hear her over the noise in the room. . . . Most people usually ignored her and worshipped her husband. (29)

His marriage to a demure woman implies that he wants to retain the “leading man” image even in his personal life. His wife’s deportment is a departure from the diverse cast of strong black women present in Gaines’ other works, most notably the mother in the short story “The Sky is Gray” and the character “Jane,” the central figure in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. Alma’s role is to serve as a public companion to Phillip, and his narcissism leads him to treat her as an obligation and a chore: “You come to me for this bed,” she says, “nothing else . . . for this bed. Cook your food. Follow you to that church. That’s all you married me for” (FH, 134). In accepting her second-class status she also observes that Phillip views himself above the men on the civil rights council. He speaks to them condescendingly and refers to them as “little men” (135). The designation suggests that Phillip separates himself from his constituents but still sees himself as a man of impact.

At the precise moment he allows himself to be assisted by white guests following a fall at his home, however, his persona and status begin to crumble: “Octave Bacheron, who knelt on the other side of him, put his small white hand on Phillip’s chest and told
him to lie still a moment” (FH, 41). The image of the robust man being helped off the floor suggests that Phillip, and St. Adrienne’s black residents, need assistance from prominent whites to help implement their political agenda. As the leader of civil rights protests in the parish for over 15 years, Phillip must be equitably gracious when it comes to black residents and white residents. Many times, according to Paul Harvey, black ministers in diverse communities “face the impossible task of pleasing both” (Redeeming the South, 27). Phillip’s inability to stand, at the moment he recognizes his son, Robert, across the room, symbolizes “the collapse of his power as a black leader and the eventual erosion of his influence” (Babb, 101). The theme of “standing,” a signature motif in Gaines’ canon, is prominent in this scene.

As Doyle points out, “even in the supposed moral power of his ministry and leadership, Phillip is subject to white power. He cannot get up, claim his son and his responsibility, and cannot stand in the moment of crisis and choice” (Voices from the Quarters, 162). It is difficult for him, literally and figuratively, to stand unassisted:

Octave Bacheron nodded to Anthony to help him get Phillip to his feet. Jonathan, who was closer to Phillip, took his arm, but Anthony pushed him roughly aside. Phillip told them again that he was all right and he could stand on his own. But the two white men insisted on helping him to his feet, and they made him lean on them as they followed Alma down the hall.

(FH, 42)

The physical act of Phillip being made to “lean on them” (42) symbolizes blacks’ dependency on the ruling class for various causes. His collapse, argues Babb, “starts him on a journey to the past and, subsequently, to the acknowledgment of those aspects of his identity he has denied” (EG, 101). As he is adept at addressing the needs of the community, he also accepts the instructions of the oppressors, contradicting, according to Doyle, “his self-identification with poor black people” (VQ, 35). In this novel of contrasts, Phillip’s ultimate paradox is captured “in the contrast of a peak moment as he
accepts the pomp and applause as the idea of his candidacy for Congress is momentarily visited, to his fall only minutes later at the sight of Robert” (161).

Against the backdrop of his image as husband and father is speculation regarding his infidelities, for “there were rumors that he was involved with women other than his wife, but . . . no one ever questioned his position as the leader of the civil rights movement in the parish” (FH, 34). Anthony B. Pinn asserts in The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era that when ministers engage in misconduct the behavior sometimes “has significant effect on the members of the congregation in the church. . . . [I]t affects the ways in which members perceive ministers. Offending clergy affect the spirituality of the members, the role of the church in the community, and the future of the local church after the misconduct has been revealed” (31). Pinn further contends that “those who depend too heavily on the charismatic leadership of a pastor find it difficult to overcome such a person’s lapses in judgment. Because the church’s vision is controlled by this one person, his or her failure is assumed to point to the failure of the proposed agenda” (3). In order for Phillip to be an effective leader he must, notes John Lowe, be “willing to sacrifice his own moral conscience as he attempts to carry out the goals and objectives of the organization and the needs of the people who place their trust in him. He must be willing to forfeit his own internal conscience as a way of demonstrating to his constituents that he is very, very brave” (Porch Talk with Ernest Gaines, 59).

Phillip’s lack of moral strength is secondary to his need to lead the community, however. According to Gaines:

“This was what Phillip Martin was called to do:

to lead. As for the humanity and all the other things

that make one strong and whole, maybe he lacked

those things. He was strong enough to know how

to get people into stores and how to get people to the

fountain and how to get people to vote and things

like this. And this was the most important thing.” (Interview, 2006)

In the economic development of a community, the black church, according to Pinn, has “maintained a publicly expressed commitment to changing the economic situations of
black Americans. Economics and politics have been the primary modes of church activism” (The Black Church, 74).

While In My Father’s House offers no evidence of Phillip’s theological training, it must be assumed that his ministry is a “calling,” a term used to define one’s “divine summons to preach” (Harvey, 169). His “call to preach” parallels Reverend Ambrose’s “call” in A Lesson Before Dying. In Gaines’ canon it is often the lay preacher whose voice articulates the needs of the residents. Phillip’s lack of formal training does little to diminish his power in the community. To support his claim as preacher and activist he notes a single symbol of progress: “. . . the little bench for you to sit on when you’re tired” (FH, 37). The reference alludes to the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr, and Rosa Parks, the African American woman whose refusal to submit her seat to a white bus patron sparked the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott in 1955.

Phillip enjoys hero-worship status, but he also relishes the freedom that comes from answering to a select few, specifically the members of the civil rights council. Bernard Paris asserts that “detached people worship freedom and independence and to be subject to no restrictions” (Imagined Human Beings, 29). Phillip presents a wholesome, outward persona, but his detachment not only separates him from the people he presumes to represent but also from the cultural memories of his past. In one of the novel’s most pivotal scenes following a reunion between Phillip and Robert, he attempts to explain why he abandoned Robert two decades earlier.

“. . . I was paralyzed. Paralyzed. Yes, I had a mouth, but I didn’t have a voice. I had legs, but I couldn’t move. I had arms, but I couldn’t life them up to you. It took a man to do these things, and I wasn’t a man. I was just some other brutish animal who could cheat, steal, rob, kill – but not stand. Not be responsible. Not protect you or your mother. They had branded that in us from the time of slavery. That’s what kept me on that floor.” (FH, 102)

Phillip, argues John Lowe, is a man “wrestling with his soul” (PT, 60). As a failed father to his first family, “nothing suggests that he ever thinks of a lost son, recalls his
childhood appearance, wonders about him, or has a restless conscience in his regard” (Doyle, 159). A challenge from Robert for his father to “say my name” (FH, 100) is his wish for paternal validation. His refusal to “name himself,” however, allows him to retain a portion of his identity without acknowledging Phillip as his father. Robert’s action—following his refusal to identify himself—symbolizes Phillip’s action with his family two decades earlier: “The boy looked at him and walked away” (FH, 105).

Gaines’ using a wide open field as the site of the two men “moving away” from each other serves as the literal framework for Phillip’s departure from the community to the rural, tight-knit community of his past. While his persona in the urban setting is firmly established, Robert disappears after the single, confrontational episode. According to Doyle, Phillip is the novel’s “only character, the one on whom all significance rests. All others seem hardly more than short stick figures around the single large one” (VQ, 172). Doyle further notes that “for all the effort expended on him initially, he [Robert] takes too little credible imagined life . . . after one scene with his father, he drops out of the novel, never known in person by his real name, or by his experiences recounted in his own voice” (172).

In Phillip’s attempt to forge a dominant argument for escape from his past, he relies upon the legacy of slavery and its effects upon fathers and sons. His self-centeredness and inability to take responsibility for his behavior is constructed upon his condemnation of an institutional oppressor: “I wanted to get up more than anything in the world. But I had to break the rules, rules we had to live by for so long, and I wasn’t strong enough to break them” (FH, 102). His inability to “break the rules” echoes Frank Laurent’s claim in the short story “Bloodline.” Frank’s refusal is based on the legacy of slavery and the institution of racism. Phillip’s inability results from a moral weakness. The irony of Phillip’s claim is that he has spent the majority of his activist-life as a “breaker of rules.”

While physical stature helps define Phillip’s public character, his lack of moral conscience distances him from those whose partnership is critical to his survival. Alma offers an explanation of Phillip’s life of detachment, not only as the separation relates to their union but also as it relates to his past:

“. . . You never included me because you wanted
to do it all yourself. 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 his mon? For other things you did in the past? The past is the past, Phillip. You can’t make up for the past. . . .” (136)

As Babb points out, Phillip must “cease running from his past . . . but seek out those people who have knowledge of him in another time” (EG, 10). As he literally moves himself to “another time” (10), his journey to the Reno Plantation forces him to join his physical self with memories and events he seemingly wants to forget. To help reconstruct his past he engages a bit of soul-searching in an attempt to understand the journey:

Why was he here? Why? Why couldn’t he just forget it like the rest did? Men see their bastards walking by the house everyday – some even joke about it. He had done the same. This was not his only child out of wedlock. He had children that he knew of by three or four other women. And he had been as proud of it as any other man. So why was he here now? (FH, 150)

In the region he can now construct memories to help him interpret the past:

He knew this road as he knew his hand, but when he reached Reno Plantation he couldn’t recall having seen a thing. He knew he had passed the store and post office at McCabe. He knew he had crossed the wooden bridge at the Two Indians Bayou near Hobson, and the road had made a sharp V-like turn to the left. He had passed the old church at Silas woods where he had gone to grammar school. (106)

He continues the journey but his unfamiliarity with the area suggests he still denies his past.
He had passed many, many houses, and he had probably passed a lot of people who waved at him. He had crossed the railroad tracks at Shottsville, and he had driven past the old weighing scale and the wooden derrick. He had to have passed all these things to get here, but he couldn’t recall any of it. He was not aware of a place of time until he reached the quarters of Reno Plantation. (105-106)

The novel’s second phase begins at the Reno Plantation, where elder members of the community help Phillip rekindle past memories. The plantation setting “as locale for Phillip’s regeneration, implies that he truly cannot be found in the urban community in which he now lives but must instead be sought in this rural parish with communal memory that connect him to his past” (Babb, 105). Retrospection begins with an observation of his godmother’s attachment to the old ways:

He looked up at the chimney, and he could see a trickle of blue smoke rising above the roof and drifting down the quarters. Why hadn’t she gotten a gas heater like most other people were doing? . . . He had even tried to buy her one. But she told him if he brought it there she wouldn’t even let it inside the house. (FH, 107)

His association with his godmother allows him to immerse himself temporarily in the culture and collective memory of the residents: “He loved her very much, and he wished he could tell her everything. But just as he had been unable to say it to anyone else, he couldn’t say it to her either” (109). His inability to speak reinforces the earlier scene at his home and reflects a subconscious determination to deny his past.

Just as he depends upon St. Adrienne’s white community for assistance he acknowledges his dependency upon members of the rural community. In a physical effort to connect with his past he momentarily adopts an act of communal behavior by drinking liquor with the laborers and behaves boisterously. At the plantation he discards his “St. Adrienne” persona and attempts to align himself with the commoners. His observation of
the “ashy gray color” (106) of the plantation houses, and his comment that “the sun is breaking through the clouds” (112) marks a critical moment in his journey. The images suggest that Phillip is slowly emerging from a state of despair to a place where he might be open to accept memories of his past. Gaines often sets the tone of a story by employing color images throughout the narrative. “The Sky is Gray” is his most prominent work where the two elements are intertwined.

Phillip’s kneeling beside his godmother, Angelina, in her small home parallels the scene in “Just Like a Tree,” where an emotional Anne-Marie Duvall kneels beside Aunt Fe before the old woman’s departure from the quarters. In the company of the community’s elders, Phillip is now willing to place all conceit at the foot of his godmother. Angelina’s request, for him to “kneel down here” (115), suggests that his metamorphosis begins literally at her feet. A weak and vulnerable Phillip – kneeling at the feet of his godmother – is a critical scene on two levels: He transfers his self-imposed power to his godmother, and he temporarily replaces his wife, Alma, with Angelina. As his godmother and “angel” on earth Angelina brings an aura of spirituality to Phillip. Doyle notes that Phillip’s “marriage to Alma was part of his bargain, more an act of propriety and convenience than of love or passion. . . . He is blinded as only the well-intentioned narcissist can be.” (VQ, 167)

The contrast between Phillip’s wife and godmother is notable, because it buttresses his conflicted persona. He runs from one woman, Alma, to consult with another, Angelina, in an attempt to secure information about another, Johanna, Robert’s mother and Phillip’s former paramour. Doyle sees Phillip’s movement of “running from” and “moving toward” not only as a character flaw in relationship to his treatment of women but also as a suppressive act as it relates to the memory of his children’s names:

Phillip’s tendency to genuine love and care
was suppressed until it surfaced, requiring a
movement “toward” Johanna and their children.
The result of that inner conflict was the moment
of paralysis when Johanna went away. That failure,
however, created a despised self whose pride
must be restored by “moving away,” by denial of
responsibility, distortion of past reality, blaming history or other people, losing contact, forgetting even his children’s names. (167)

Keeling at his godmother’s feet and experiencing a spiritual metamorphosis is a “scene of convenience” which invariably leads Phillip to another person of religious bearing: Reverend Peters.

Phillip observes that Reverend Peters “looked very tired, his eyes bloodshot” (FH, 151). The man “who sat on the bench opposite Phillip” (151) is his alter ego. He reflects Phillip’s state of exhaustion, but he also “saw something in Phillip’s face that he didn’t like” (153): his claim of being a minister. Reverend Peters is able to see Phillip’s transparency. Babb observes:

In the aged man’s weary aspect and in the shame of spiritual leadership he proffers, Phillip sees a manifestation of a psychological existence too close to his own. No longer is he “Reverend Martin,” a genuine man of the cloth, he is now a pretender, a parody of religious symbol. The more Phillip’s self-contempt increases, the more he sees himself in Peters. (EG, 105)

In a stylistic flaw of the novel, Gaines fails to provide a plausible trajectory of Phillip’s background from wayward young man to “supposedly sacred, serious, effective activist preacher and leader” (VQ, 163). Such an omission, Doyle notes, suggests that Phillip’s likely conversion “has no power or reality in the reader’s imagination” (163). Although Phillip speaks with Reverend Peters of a kinship with black men who lose their sons, embedded in his comment that fathers “don’t have time at all” (FH, 153) for God to “bring back” (153) lost sons is the collective voice of black fathers who are themselves lost. If absent fathers are perceived as the cause of society’s ills, argues Dorothy Roberts, it is “largely because black culture is considered the benchmark of social degeneracy” (Lost Fathers, 146).

Despite Reverend Peters’ insistence that Phillip “keep the faith” (FH, 153) and remain hopeful, Phillip maintains that such a mandate is difficult, because “there’s a gap
between us and our sons... that even He can’t seem to close” (154). His disillusionment with God no longer allows his faith to be controlled by the image he represents to outsiders. As he moves toward becoming an “ordinary citizen” the closer he comes, argues Babb, “to a coexistence with those very elements in his community from which he was so removed” (EG, 107).

Phillip’s journey leads him to Billy, a troubled young man who is alienated from his own father. He is a symbolic figure of cultural division whose prescription for social change is revolutionary and simplistic. Through Billy, Phillip hopes to understand the separatism that exists between fathers and sons as well as gain an understanding of his son’s anger. While Billy’s response to social change borders on implausible tactics, Robert’s anger is personal. By killing his father he hopes to liberate himself from the pain of abandonment and growing up fatherless. Billy sees his own father as a relic of old ideologies. In the following exchange Phillip attempts to understand the gulf between fathers and sons.

“What happened, Billy? he said, turning to the young man beside him.

“What ever happened?” Phillip asked, looked out on the road.

“When did what happen? Billy asked.

“When did that gap come between you and your daddy?”

“I don’t remember,” Billy said.

“Not a particular day, not a particular thing?” Phillip asked.

“I don’t remember no one day, no one thing,” Billy said. Phillip looked at him. “You mean we’re born that way?”

“The gap’s already there when we take the first breath.”

“How do we close the gap, Billy?” Phillip asked.

“I don’t know,” Billy said. (FH, 165)

As Gaines does in many of his works, he positions a central figure to conceptualize a central motif. Just as Munford Bazille in “Three Men” theorizes on the notion of black masculinity and gender sexualization, and Copper Laurent espouses
rhetoric on race and birthrights in “Bloodline,” Billy offers a theory on the gap that divides fathers and sons:

“Just because I can eat at the white folks’ counter
with my daddy, just because I can ride with him in
the front of the bus don’t mean we any closer, “ Billy said.
“Then the civil rights movement didn’t bring us together
at all?”
“Not that I can see,” Billy said.
“Then what will close the gap between me and my boy?”
“My daddy got to catch up with me,” Billy said. “I can’t go
back to where he’s at.” (FH, 166)

Implicit in Billy’s comment is the notion that Phillip “can’t go back” but must, in
fact, continue to move forward. In a 1972 interview with John O’Brien, Gaines says
“there must always be those who try to change conditions; there must always be those
who try to break out of the trap the world keeps going in. Man must keep moving”
(Conversations with Ernest J. Gaines, 29). Phillip’s efforts to understand the dynamics of
the father-and-son relationship rests on his willingness to continuously “move forward,”
both literally and figuratively. Phillip’s response to Billy’s theory, that “there were
probably many others just like them” (FH, 170), suggests a sense of hopelessness at the
chance of creating a bond with his son.

Billy’s hostility arises from a sense of alienation from society, and his solution to
a changing world is to operate under a code of violence: “. . . burn the country to the
ground” (162), for “if you destroy Western civilization,” he reasons, “you put the world
back right” (162):

“The honky don’t understand but two things,
mister – bullets and fire. This whole country’s been
built on bullets and fire. Go ask the Indians, go
ask the Japs. Go ask the Koreans, the Vietnamese.
All non-white people. Even when they lynch a nigger
they have to burn him, too. Bullets and fire is all he
knows. Well, I intend to get there first.” (FH, 168)
While Billy represents the new generation of men unwilling to operate under the dictates of the old ways, Phillip still believes in the merits of the old guard. David C. Estes observes that “Martin sees that civil rights may have improved relations between blacks and white but that father-and-son relationships remain unaffected because of a lack of communication” (Critical Reflections, 167). In the final exchange between Billy and Phillip, Billy captures what Phillip is reluctant to acknowledge: “Nothing gon’ change till somebody change it” (FH, 169). Implicit in the comment is a dictate that Phillip, in the circumstances of his own life, must work to “change it.” While Billy’s vision is not a comfortable view for Phillip, it does permit him to question his own role as leader of a younger generation of activists. Billy’s approach to change borders on appropriating the radicalism espoused by a small faction of political activists during his military years.

While Phillip’s position of authority and political power slowly erode, “in his retrospection, every question Phillip ponders in relation to his public identity has a direct impact on his private one” (Babb, 107). Billy’s presence accentuates Phillip’s sense of morality, because in Phillip’s inability to adopt Billy’s notions of change, his “continuing self-scrutiny makes his awareness of a dual existence even more acute, and a veil of remorse obscures the minister” (107). As the despair of his son merges with Billy’s voice, the meaning of both young men’s anger and disillusionment begins to occupy a central place in Phillip’s consciousness. Where Robert’s psychic rage and response is an internal hate, Billy’s anger is exhibited through a verbal expression of violence.

Phillip’s continuous movement of reconciliation leads him to Adeline Toussaint, a former lover, whose flamboyant style contrasts with his reticent behavior. His reintroduction to Adeline, notes Babb, allows him to continue a “downward spiral from minister to father to carnal man” (EG, 107). He sees Adeline as a “very handsome woman, with high cheekbones, large dark-brown eyes, and full lips. . . . A sudden warm good feeling came over him that he wished was not there . . . feeling a way that he knew was not right” (FH, 175). While Phillip suppresses his sexual desire for Adeline he simultaneously seeks validation of their past relationship. Her confession of platonic love informs him of the pain and suffering he may have inflicted upon others:

“Love?” he said. She nodded her head.
“Why did you get married?”
“They wanted to.”
“Both times?” She nodded again.
“But you did love once?”
“Did I?”
“You said so.”
She laughed. “Stop it, Phillip Martin.”
He was hurt. “Well?” (176-77)

Adeline insists on being honest and therefore continues to offer her assessment of their past relationship:

“How many times that’s been said by both man and woman? How many times you yourself have said that to a woman. You meant it every time?”
His feelings were hurt still. He shook his head. “No.”
“A woman can lie too—in more ways than one.”
“Were you lying all the time, Adeline?”
“With you?”
“Yes.” (177)

Because Phillip has not completely discarded his image – and fears rejection himself – he is unable to accept Adeline’s words: “I think you’re lying now. . . . I think you loved me that morning, you loved me all them other mornings. You left me because you was scared I might leave you. That was it, wasn’t it, Adeline?” (173). His meeting with Adeline facilitates memories of his earlier years in which he “could remember when he had danced there [at the local club]. Not to BB King’s records, but to Louis Jordan’s, Joe Turner’s, and some of the other earlier blues singers” (173). The conversation with Adeline and the memory of the site is significant, because meeting Adeline “forces him to admit to the guile that governed his relationships with women” (Babb, 108). In order for him to maintain his image he must continue to lie. Concurrent with his dismissal of Adeline’s confession is an admission of his inner turmoil:

“You wasn’t the one lying, Adeline, it was me all the time, I’m wondering now, after all these
years, if I’m not still lying. Lying to myself. God. Lying to my people. I’m at war with myself. I’m at war with my soul. For the past few days I’ve been questioning myself. I don’t come up with nothing but doubts – about everything.” (FH, 178)

As the encounter with Billy helps guides Phillip toward an understanding of himself, his confession to Adeline strips him of any pretense of moral authority. As the memory of their past resurfaces, his declining Adeline’s invitation suggests that accepting her would have meant losing ground in his movement toward change. In the moment he refuses her invitation lies the framework for genuine movement. “Goodbye, Adeline” (179) is Phillip’s conscientious declaration to move from the past and into a different arena.

The introduction of Chippo Simon, in the last third of the novel, brings Phillip to the final stage in his journey to redemption. His search for the man who can provide information about Johanna ends the circle of figures from his past. Doyle argues that Chippo’s introduction serves as a “foil to Phillip” (VQ, 169). He is, she maintains, “what Phillip might have become, not mean or without human values, but still a roustabout. . . ” (169).

Tall, slim, but solidly built man in his early sixties. His long, narrow fact was the color of dark, well-used leather, and it looked just as tough. His sharp features, his thick, curly black-gray hair showed that he had as much white or Indian in him as he did African. He looked like a person who did not worry much; he would take life as it came. (FH, 180)

Phillip’s memory of Chippo, whose self-description as a “rover” (214) defines Phillip’s current journey, exudes brotherly love, and reflects their past association as young men in the community:

“Me and Chippo. . . [A]ll them days we used to drink together, play ball together, roam together. Used to go courting together – everything. Then I joined the
church, and he just kept on going on his own way. But we brothers still. Soul brothers. . . . [T]hat was me and Chippo. Soul brothers.” (114)

Their reputations in the community are legendary, and in Phillip’s days of carefree living he, too, took life “as it came” (180). Now, each man needs something from the other: Phillip seeks information regarding the welfare of his first family, and Chippo wants to reinforce to Phillip that Phillip’s strength and courage are assets that are still needed in the community. As Chippo cautions Phillip to continue to be an activist and leader, he counters Phillip’s remark that the minister no longer cares: “You do care, man. . . . [T]hat’s for the rest of them no-‘count niggers on East Boulevard to say – ‘I don’t care.’ Not for you, man. . . .” (208). Chippo knows that he could never have assumed Phillip’s role in the community, but he respects and values Phillip’s position.

Phillip admits that he has tried to forget his past. He concludes, however, that “you got to start [remembering] sometime” (201). In his youth he believed that religion and redefining his public image from ladies’ man to minister would be his salvation. He confesses his efforts to forget his past and overcome the burden:

“You know how hard I been trying to forget? . . .
I went to religion to forget it. I prayed and prayed and prayed to forget it. I tried to wipe out everything in my past, make my mind blank, start over. I thought the good work I was doing with the church, with the people, would make up for all the things I had done in the past. Till one day I look across my living room. . . . [F]rom the moment I saw him in that house—I fell, Chippo. I fell. When I saw him in that room my legs buckled, and I fell. When I got up—I didn’t tell them I fell because I recognized my son in the house.” (201)

Chippo’s burdens are different:

Chippo was tired, drained of all physical strength, but his mind relieved [of delivering information to Phillip
regarding Johanna’s whereabouts]. Relieved of a burden, as he had said, as one’s mind is relieved after going to confession. The body was still tired though from wandering, gambling through the evening and the night, and especially from talking about something that he didn’t find pleasant. . . . [B]ut where Chippo’s mind had been relieved of a burden by talking about it, Phillip felt a heavier burden by hearing about it. (200)

During Chippo’s conversation with Phillip, he stumbles upon truths which Phillip needs “to unify his two identities. It is Chippo who can tell Phillip his son’s ‘true’ name as well as the names of his other two children by Johanna. . . .” (Babb, 109). During Phillip’s absence his son – whose name Chippo reveals as Etienne – assumed the role of father. Chippo claims that “Etienne was the oldest, the man of the house, it was his job.” (FH, 196). While Phillip’s strategy is to replace the failures of his past with a duty to religion and political activism, Robert’s position as household leader was eventually replaced by another male figure: his younger brother Antoine. The cultural tradition of sons replacing fathers is a practice owning primarily to the absence of strong, patriarchal figures in the home.

Chippo Simon, observes Babb, “is the embodiment of the desires Phillip has kept hidden, the other side of Phillip’s public personality, what Phillip would be had he not found religion. . . . [C]hippo has dissipated himself with liquor, women, and bad debts. . . .” (EG, 109). Phillip queries his own weakness and, collectively, that of a generation of men who fail in their responsibilities and obligations as fathers:

“I laid on that floor, Chippo, and listened to Octave Bacheron telling the people I fell because I was tired. Why Chippo? When will we break that bond? When will we make our people tell the truth? When will we make our legs go to our sons and make our arms protect our sons? When, Chippo? When?” (FH, 202)
Gaines maintains that the failure of black fathers is rooted in slavery’s history, and personal responsibility must be engaged in order to help close the gap. Phillip likens the incapability of black fathers raising their sons to a psychological paralysis:

“I was telling my boy today what keep us apart is a paralysis we inherited from slavery. Paralysis kept me on that bed that day he knocked on that door. Paralysis kept me on that floor Saturday when I shoulda got up and told the people who he was. I thought fifteen years ago when I found religion I had overthrown my paralysis. But it’s still there, Chippo. How do you get rid of it, Chippo. How do you shake it off?” (202)

Phillip’s questions signal a turning point in his journey. Like Grant Wiggins, the plantation schoolteacher in A Lesson Before Dying who implores Jefferson, the field hand, to teach him the meaning of dignity and manhood, Phillip solicits the opinion of his laborer-friend to help him understand the paternal divide between fathers and sons. Gaines’ pairing of opposing figures in his work suggests that it is often the commoner whose wisdom supersedes the upwardly mobile residents in the community. Chippo Simon also reveals that his (own) name is “Erin Simon” (FH, 213). The revelation serves two purposes: It suggests that Phillip’s narcissism prevented him from learning Chippo’s true identity, and it reinforces the minister’s lack of concern in knowing his own children’s names. As Phillip moves forward he gradually becomes more cognizant of his ‘true’ self.

Robert’s ultimate action in the narrative occurs at Big Man Bayou. His death by drowning becomes Phillip’s spiritual rebirth. At the news of his death Phillip’s ultimate transformation begins. His intent to rectify his previous misdeeds presents, as Gaines notes, the father’s literal and figurative act of “coming back” (Interview, 2006). Dependent upon Chippo to accentuate his (Phillip’s) claim of returning to make amends with his son, Phillip tells the assembled crowd at Chippo’s house: “I was just coming back home to talk to him. . . . [C]hippo’s my witness there. Chippo just told me his name.
I was coming back home to talk to him. Tell them, Chippo” (FH, 203). Even though Phillip declares a “coming back” (203), his failure to “see it [Etienne’s suicide] coming” (203) suggests he still does not completely grasp the impact of his negligence upon his son.

Comparable to the white activists assisting Phillip after he falls, the white law enforcement officials pull Robert out of the water. The symbolism of the two scenes suggests that saving (or attempting to save) black men’s lives can only occur within the social and political boundaries of white assistance. Robert’s “standing on that trestle over Big Man Bayou” (203) was both his triumph and, ironically, his defeat. His death not only ends his suffering, it frees Phillip from the burdens of his own past and serves as the catalyst for his future survival. As his former life is exposed to the community, he proclaims that the community does not understand the sacrifices he has made on its behalf. Where he has previously defined himself by his public image, he now claims defeat. He views his efforts in the community as no longer viable:

“Nobody know how this nigger feels,” Phillip said gazing down at the floor, his big arms hanging down between his legs the way a defeated fighter’s arms would hang. “You work, you work – what good it do? You bust your ass – what good it do? Man and God, both in one day, tell you to go to hell, go fuck yourself.” (207)

As the community serves witness to Phillip’s public emasculation, he claims, in a moment of self-pity, that “it’s over with” (208). The comment gives Chippo the opportunity to declare that “somebody got to care, man . . . somebody got to keep on caring. He gon’n get hurt caring, but he can’t never stop” (207). As he articulates Phillip’s importance in the social and political arena he also attempts to restore Phillip’s confidence. Chippo echoes the disenfranchised:

“You can’t stop. . . . We need you out there too much. Just like you see me – this old ugly half-blind nigger – I need you out there. I need somebody out there to look up to. There ain’t nobody else out there to look up to.
You, I look up to. There ain’t nobody else out there
to look up to.” (208)

By proclaiming his need for someone to emulate, Chippo subconsciously replaces
Phillip in a position of leadership. The repositioning, according to Babb, is “leadership
encompassing a different meaning” (EG, 109). Phillip’s disintegration is further
evidenced by his questioning God’s failure in allowing him to continue serving the
community and His denying him his son:

“How come He let this happen? How come He
stood by me all these years, but not today? I’ve
walked through mobs and mobs. Traveled every
dark muddy road in this state. ‘Cause I knewed
He was there with me. Why He give me all that
strength, the courage to do all them other things,
and when I asked Him for my boy. . . . [D]idn’t He
hear me, Chippo? What is it, Chippo? Why won’t
He let this poor black man reach his son? Was
that so hard to do? Was that asking Him for too
much?” (FH, 209)

Chippo’s vision of the once-untouchable Phillip is momentarily replaced by his
perspective on Phillip as a man with weaknesses much like his own. In the manner of a
preacher confessing sins from the pulpit, Phillip reverts to his religious background and
speaks as a spiritual leader to the crowd at Chippo’s home:

“I was an animal before I was Revered Phillip J.
Martin. I was an animal. He changed me to a man.
He straightened my back. He raised my head. He
gave me feelings, compassion, made me responsible
for my fellow man. My back wasn’t straightened
before He straightened it. My eyes stayed on the ground.
I took everything I could from my fellow man, and
didn’t give him nothing back. . . . I woulda looked at
my son going by the house, and I woulda forgotten him
if it wasn’t for Him. . . . I can’t forget my son. . . . That’s why I say He owed me my son. Once He made me a human being, He owed me my son.” (212)

As Babb contends, “Phillip’s past victories are also placed in a different context when he realizes that his past identity is not separate from but an integral part of his present identity. Refining his role as a leader moves him to a subsequent reconsideration of his role as father” (EG, 110). As Phillip redefines himself he must acknowledge that Robert’s death can serve a greater good: Phillip must accept that he is irretrievably bound to his past, and in embracing his current children he hopes to be able to atone for the mistakes made with his first family. Robert’s drowning will lead to new discoveries about fatherhood and personal responsibility.

As Beverly Ricord, the school teacher from St. Adrienne, reminds Phillip of his young son’s pride in the minister’s accomplishments, she cautions him that he must be vigilant in keeping Patrick “from going to that trestle” (FH, 213). Phillip’s imminent transformation is a chance to construct a paternal bond and build a relationship, one established upon trust and mutual respect. As successive generations learn to embrace diverse social and political ideologies, Phillip’s “odyssey toward personal responsibility strengthens his integrity, and he sees that social impact is meaningful only as long as it can be measured in terms of individual and familial benefit” (Babb, 111).

In his desire to keep Patrick from meeting Robert’s fate Phillip seems close to reconciling himself with his past. In drafting the novel Gaines admits that he had “some difficulty” (Interview, 2006) but maintains that he wanted to write a story “about a great man falling but somehow coming back” (Interview, 2006). The problem, he concludes, “was how to have Phillip Martin redeem himself or [figuring out] what would Robert X wind up doing or [deciding] exactly what was going to happen” (Interview, 2006). Gaines tried to write the novel from different characters’ perspectives but admits that this, too, proved unsuccessful.

“I tried rewriting it from so many different points of view. I tried writing it from Chippo Simon’s point of view. I tried writing it from multiple points of view, but nothing was coming for me. So I just said, ‘ok, I’m going with
the omniscient point of view, and I’ll go as far as I can with that and then, after seven years of it I just said that I’d had enough of it.” (Interview, 2006)

He admits that the conflict between Phillip and Robert is one that he is “not sure is resolved” (Interview, 2006).

Doyle argues that the novel “was meant to reflect his [Gaines’] constant concern about the separation of black fathers from their sons and the resultant damage, moral or physical, to both. No black man can be fully a man if he cannot be, or is simply not, responsible for his children” (VQ, 156). From Phillip Martin’s lofty stature in the community through his journey of self-discovery, he admits, in the end, that he is “lost” (FH, 214). The confession, which comes at the most critical juncture in his life, is significant because it is the first time he acknowledges his fears and owns his moral weaknesses.

Phillip’s literal and psychological movement toward redemption functions in part through the novel’s episodic construction and characters that conveniently appear at the moment of the minister’s distress. The journey commences following Robert’s abbreviated appearance in the novel’s opening scenes to encounters with Reverend Peters, Billy, and Adeline Toussaint, who help Phillip move closer to reconciling himself with his past. According to Herman Beavers “it is the community or figures in the community that lead the individual to a state of recovery and rebirth, often because information passed down from elder to progeny allows the individual to reassess the present, to confront its dilemmas with a renewed sense of purpose” (Wrestling Angels into Song, 68). Adeline Toussaint and Chippo Simon, communal figures from Phillip’s days as a “rover” (FH, 214), play integral roles in Phillip’s journey to self-discovery. He moves, argues Doyle, “from grief to anger to depression and despair” (VQ, 170), ending up in the company of Alma whom he dismissed at the beginning of his quest. Just as the community shares in the father’s transformation in “A Long Day in November,” so, too, does the community share in Phillip’s pending transformation.

While many of the scenes in the novel seem contrived, In My Father’s House addresses various forces that conspire to separate fathers and sons. Doyle claims that sooner or later “a man . . . sorts out motivations, makes choices, and takes
responsibilities” for his children (VQ, 173). Gaines admits that he struggled mightily with the novel and “was never absolutely satisfied” with what he “did with the book . . . and after seven years [of writing the novel] I just said that I’d had enough of it” (Interview, 2006). Yet Gaines does succeed in portraying Reverend Phillip J. Martin as a man on the brink of awareness of past failures, and now Phillip has a chance begin anew. Robert’s suicide in the bayou and Phillip’s diminished status not only symbolize an opportunity for Phillip to “start over” (FH, 214). The parallel action also suggests that redemption is indeed within his reach.
CHAPTER III: A LESSON BEFORE DYING

In Search of Satisfaction:
Grant Wiggins’ Pilgrimage to the Center of Himself
in A Lesson Before Dying

For unto whomsoever much is given,
of him shall much be required.
--- Luke 12:48

As a reluctant son of the South who returns to the plantation to teach, Grant Wiggins, the narrator in A Lesson Before Dying, has a very tall order to fill. As the “chosen one” to teach Jefferson, the condemned man, how to die with dignity, he must navigate the racial terrain of the community while also maintaining a sense of manhood, dignity, and self-respect. Referenced throughout the narrative as “the teacher,” there are certain duties and obligations expected of him by the plantation elders and the schoolchildren who look up to him, members of the ruling class who look down on him, and the women in his life who constantly try to manage, control, dictate, and direct his public and private affairs. According to Mary Helen Washington, the “chosen ones” were always the “bright and talented ones in the family. They were the ones selected to go to college if the family could afford to send only one; they were meant to have the better life, the chance at success” (Everyday Use: Alice Walker, 94). As the community’s “designated member,” Grant is expected to show his appreciation for the “gift” of his education and return the favor to the community which sees him as more than a teacher. There is little place for him to negotiate the terms of that order. As the recipient of the sweat equity of the laboring class, he “belongs” to the community more than he belongs to himself: The favorite son must now perform on command.

In African American literature there is a sustained tradition of designating a “chosen one” as principal character. Dee/Wongo, the central figure in Alice Walker’s biographical short story “Everyday Use” (1973), for example, is the designated member in the family to attend college. As one of the best and brightest in the rural community, she accepts the coveted title but feels disconnected from the community once she returns. As Walker recounts in the autobiographical poem “For My Sister Molly Who in the Fifties” (1972) her sister was the “chosen one” in their family. Like Grant Wiggins,
Molly feels remote, distant, and disconnected from her roots when she returns to the family home for a short visit. According to Walker, her sister Molly:

> Found much
> Unbearable
> Who walked where few had
> Understood And sensed our
> Groping after light
> And saw some extinguished
> And no doubt mourned. . . . (Everyday Use, 54)

Not all of the “chosen ones,” however, feel disconnected from their heritage. As a young boy on the Point Coupee’ plantation in Oscar, Louisiana, Gaines, for example, was in many respects, the “chosen one.” When other children were often engaged in child-play, he was charged with writing letters for the plantation’s elders. He recounts his appointment as the unofficial scribe of the quarters:

> “My aunt raised me . . . she never did walk . . . and because she couldn’t visit others, the people use to visit our house. . . . [N]one of these people had ever gone to any school. No education at all. It was my aunt who told me that I should write their letters for them and read their letters for them when they received mail, which I did. . . . [T]hey would come over there, and I’d sit on the floor by their chair. Sometime, if it was a man that I was writing a letter for, he’d sit on the floor or on the porch, or I’d be sitting on the steps, and I’d have my little yellow pencil and write on a tablet . . . and I’d write their letters. . . . [T]hey would know how to begin the letter, but they wouldn’t know how to proceed. . . . So you just try and put it [their thoughts] down, and then you read them back. . . . [B]ut they would always call on me. . . . I was the ‘chosen one’ to do those kinds of things.”

(Interview, 2006)
As Jefferson’s fate has been declared by a twelve-man jury, Grant’s order – to teach Jefferson how to defy the label of “hog” by standing as a man – is also gender-based. In order for Grant to maintain the semblance of a life in the quarters and negotiate his personal space in the process, he must also acquiesce to the dictates of the women who dominate that life: Tante Lou, his deeply religious, church-going, great aunt with whom he shares a home but has a volatile relationship, Miss Emma, Jefferson’s godmother who declares that she doesn’t “want them to kill no hog” (LBD, 13), and Vivian Baptiste, his girlfriend who encourages him to have an association with Jefferson while trying to maintain the strength and validity of their own relationship. Amid intense pressures from the women for Grant to impart an understanding of manhood to Jefferson, Grant examines his own grasp of what manhood is:

“Do I know what a man is? Do I know how a man is supposed to die? I’m still trying to find out how a man should live. Am I supposed to tell someone how to die who has never lived? . . . [S]uppose I was allowed to visit him, and suppose I reached him and made him realize that he was as much a man as any other man; then what? . . . what will I have accomplished? What will I have done?” (LBD, 31)

Even though Grant is seen as a role model in the community, he is emotionally exhausted from being held to a higher standard than other residents. A great portion of his physical and emotional exhaustion results from the tumultuous relationship he shares with his aunt who constantly upbraids him, not only because of his reluctance to forge an association with Jefferson but also because he refuses to attend church. Attending church, reasons his aunt, is an act of nobility: It confers goodness, signifies decency, and keeps one grounded. It also, as his aunt sees it, keeps a person connected to the people. Most importantly it prevents one from becoming “uppity” (100), a term she consistently uses to define, what she imagines to be, Grant’s “better-than-you” disposition.

An exasperated Grant explains to Tante Lou how emasculated he feels during his visits to the sheriff’s home and, subsequently, at the jail:

“Everything you sent me to school for, you’re stripping
me of it. . . . [T]he humiliation I had to go through, going into that man’s kitchen. The hours I had to wait while they ate and drank and socialized before they would even see me. Now going up to that jail. To watch them put their dirty hands on that food. To search my body each time as if I’m some kind of common criminal. Maybe today they’ll want to look into my mouth, or my nostrils, or make me strip. Anything to humiliate me. All the things you wanted me to escape by going to school. Years ago, Professor Antoine told me that if I stayed here, they were going to break me down to the nigger I was born to be. But he didn’t tell me that my aunt would help them do it.” (79)

In commenting on Grant’s objection to entering the back door of the sheriff’s home as he accompanies Miss Emma on her quest, Tante Lou caustically replies, “‘I’m sorry, Mr. Grant, I’m helping them white people to humiliate you. I’m so sorry. And I wished they had somebody else we could turn to. But they ain’t nobody else’” (79). While Tante Lou has been instrumental in Grant’s acquisition of a college degree, she also feels a sense of inferiority because of it. The paradox emanates from the opportunity Grant has at ascertaining a “better life” versus her inability to find such an opportunity: “I didn’t ask for none of your uppity, mister” (100). “Had I not been doing for you,’ she reasons, ‘I could have been doing for myself. You are, Grant Wiggins, because I could not.”

Although he has attained a college degree, he still does not meet her standards of behavior for being a man of faith. Vivian’s church-going habits, on the other hand, signal to Tante Lou and Aunt Emma that she is a “lady of quality” (116). As Tante Lou encourages Vivian to remain true to her faith and never “‘give up God . . . no matter what” (116), she sarcastically references Grant’s disconnect from the church. “This one,” she remarks derisively to Vivian after Grant introduces them to each other, “he don’t have a church” (114). Where Vivian might have been previously viewed as an interloper as well as a distraction in Grant’s duties in the home and community, as those duties relate to teaching Jefferson how to die with dignity, the “pretty young lady” (16) with the
“good manners” (116) now secures her place in Grant’s family. In Tante Lou’s perspective, Grant might be “educated,” but because he does not have God in his life, he is not a man of “quality.” For Tante Lou, having an education and having God in your life equals “quality.”

As Tante Lou attempts to control every aspect of her nephew’s life, her efforts are countered each step of the way as he continues to maintain as much personal momentum as he can in a psychological tug-of-war against her. As he separates himself from all things religious, he continues, to his aunt’s dismay, to defy everything she represents in her home and in the community. His defiance is the one weapon he manages to retain, and he uses it at his disposal. As Tante Lou finds strength in the church and with persons of similar ideals, Grant strives to maintain a measure of peace within himself in the midst of the turmoil.

Tante Lou’s controlling nature is, historically, a stereotype of the strong, domineering black woman in African American fiction. Not only does her narrative discourse fit the dialogue of the well-meaning, church-going woman, her physical appearance and demeanor fit the literary construct as well. In the opening passage of the story she and Miss Emma are described as “large” (BL, 3). Tante Lou’s sturdy physique – similar to Miss Emma’s two-hundred pounds – fits the stereotypical stature of the black churchwoman in literature and maximizes her dominant role in the narrative. Churchwomen, argues Trudier Harris, “are the standard-bearers for religion and religious behavior in African American fictional communities. By being solidly grounded in the church, religion, and God, they determine who else should be, under what circumstances, and when” (Oxford Companion to African American Literature, 147). Tante Lou believes that Grant is a sinner, and her strong beliefs cloud any other aspect of the goodness and civility that he might bring to her life and to the lives of the community’s residents. While churchwomen “may have good intentions,” Harris further maintains, “they can just as easily stunt the growth of people around them” (147). Grant compares the mental strength of Miss Emma and Tante Lou to “boulders, their bodies, their minds immovable” (LBD, 14).

As the man selected to do the community’s bidding in teaching Jefferson to stand, Grant is given no chance to refuse, and his options for non-compliance are few. His aunt
constantly belittles him as he balks at the order: “You going with us up the quarter. . . . [Y]ou going up there with us [to Henri Pichot’s home], Grant, or you don’t sleep in this house tonight” (BL, 14). As he continuously battles for his psychological freedom, Grant, claims Harris:

. . . enables us to see the impact of Tante Lou’s raising practices upon him, for he is an exemplary manifestation of the offspring affected by the strong black women character. . . . To the strong, black female character who has reared a manchild under especially difficult circumstances, that offspring has one option: to do as he is told. Thus, Tante Lou can exert as much biological tyranny in Grant as his literary ancestors do.” (Saints, Sinners, Saviors, 162)

He not only has the dubious responsibility of adhering to his aunt’s wishes, he must also submit to the muffled pleas of Jefferson’s godmother. While repeatedly declaring that Grant “don’t have to do it” [visit Jefferson in jail] (LBD, 14), she privately hopes that he is compassionate enough to do so despite his aunt’s edict. Miss Emma’s subtle articulation and peaceful demeanor, along with Tante Lou’s threat, leave him feeling emasculated, powerless, and incapable of denying his aunt’s demands or Miss Emma’s appeal without suffering the consequences of their verbal and emotional wrath.

As strong women in the community, each has learned to negotiate the economic and racial boundaries of their impoverished lives – while raising two men, Grant and Jefferson – under the most difficult circumstances. Aunt Emma feels, however, that her former relationship with the powerful Henri Pichot family gives her leverage to summon a favor of visitation with Jefferson. Grant sums up Miss Emma’s and Tante Lou’s roles in the Pichot home.

Miss Emma was the cook up here then. She wore the white dress and white shoes and the kerchief around her head. She had been here long before I was born, probably when my mother and father were children. She had cooked for Henri and his brother and sister, as well as for his nieces and nephews; he did not have any
children of his own. She cooked, she ran the house; my aunt washed and ironed. (18)

Miss Emma, like Amalia in “Bloodline,” who served the Laurent household for generations, uses her decades-long position as generational caretaker to articulate the claim that she is, on the most basic, human level, due a return on her “investment” in the family.

“They called my boy a hog, Mr. Henri. I didn’t raise no hog, and I don’t want no hog to set in that chair. I want a man to go set in that chair, Mr. Henri. . . . I’m old, Mr. Henri. Jefferson go’n need me, but I’m too old to be going up there. My heart won’t take it. I want you talk to the sheriff for me. I want somebody else take my place. . . . I done done a lot for this family and this place, Mr. Henri. All I’m asking you talk to the sheriff for me.” (LBD, 20-21)

Unafraid to speak her mind, she presents herself accordingly, emphasizing not only her physical investment in the family but her emotional investment as well:

“I done done a lot for this family over the years. . . .
[T]ell him what I done for this family, Mr. Henri. Tell him to ask his wife all I done done for this family over the years. . . . I done done a lot for this family over the years. . . . [I]’ll be up here gain tomorrow, Mr. Henri. I’ll be on my knees next time you see me, Mr. Henri.” (22-23)

As Miss Emma has given of herself to the Pichot family, the community’s investment in Grant is just as significant. Miss Emma and Tante Lou’s friendship is as strong as the love Miss Emma has for her godson, and even though Grant, according to Gaines, “wanted to avoid the entire South,” and, by extension, the forced association with Jefferson, he must acknowledge, however grudgingly, that he, too, is invested in the community. Miss Emma and Tante Lou are independent, resolute women, born of the same economic class and cultural heritage, and their morals, values, and work ethics
command Grant’s respect and consideration. Even as he continues to visit Jefferson he is still unsure of his role within the broader scope of communal responsibilities.

Tante Lou’s and Miss Emma’s lives are mirror images of each other’s, but it is Grant’s aunt who has made the most essential sacrifice on his behalf. Reverend Ambrose, the “uneducated” plantation preacher, the one who “heard the voice and started preaching” (101), informs Grant of the emotional and physical sacrifices Tante Lou has made on his behalf.

“She been lying every day of her life, your aunt in there. That’s how you got through that university – cheating herself here, cheating herself there, but always telling you she’s all right. I’ve seen her hands bleed from picking cotton. I’ve seen the blisters from the hoe and the cane knife. At that church, crying on her knees. You ever looked at the scabs on her knees, boy? Course you never. ‘Cause she never wanted you to see it.” (218)

Just as Miss Emma and Tante Lou have made sacrifices to their families and in the community, so, too, has Vivian. As Grant slowly internalizes the depth of his assigned role, he must also try and heal the emotional divide which threatens his relationship with Vivian.

Early in the narrative she offers Grant support to help him understand that because they are role models in the community, their commitment extends beyond the children they teach in the quarters. Their presence represents hope and the possibility of change for future generations. They cannot, as he suggests, “just pack up and leave” (29). A physical move from the plantation will not, Vivian explains, resolve the communal and familial obligations that Grant seeks to run away from. His resentment at having to return to the quarters partially accounts for his anger, and his declaration of needing to “go someplace where I can feel I’m living” (29) has merit. Not only does his comment suggest that his daily life is a living-death experience, it also alludes to the emotional and psychological weight of Jefferson’s approaching execution. Although Grant’s burdens suffocate his relationship with Vivian and stifle his ability to effectively teach the
children, he does not refute her claim when she says “you love them [Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and the students] more than you hate this place” (94).

Vivian’s deportment as a caring and nurturing woman sharply contrasts Tante Lou’s abrasive demeanor and Miss Emma’s quiet strength. Her calm nature and steady influence provide Grant the strength to maintain a fraction of inner peace as he slowly acquiesces to the demands from his aunt and Jefferson’s godmother. He explains to Jefferson, who has made crude remarks about Vivian, the emotional and personal toll he suffers as he constantly tries to communicate with him against his will. His visits to the jail, he claims, only continue because of her encouragement and support. Grant’s constant use of the word “boy” stems from his anger at being forced to serve as Jefferson’s mentor rather than its use as a term of disrespect.

“That lady you spoke of, boy, cares a lot about you. . . .
She’s waiting at that school right now for me to bring
her news about you. That’s a lady you spoke of, boy.
That’s a lady. Because it’s she who keeps me coming
here. Not your nannan, not my aunt. Vivian. If we
didn’t have Vivian, I wouldn’t be in this damn hole.
Because I know damn well I’m not doing any good, for
you or for any of the others.” (130)

One of the thematic traits central to Gaines’ fiction is a theoretical summation of a central motif by a major character in the work. In “Three Men,” Munford Bazille, the veteran criminal, offers his cellmates, Proctor Lewis and Hattie, a lesson on the nature of black masculinity in a society scarred by racism. Copper Laurent’s theory in “Bloodline” speaks of the effects that the splintered family has upon black men. A Gathering of Old Men (1983) allows each man an opportunity to narrate his own life experiences in a society that devalues them and invalidates their presence. In A Lesson Before Dying, Grant delivers an impassioned discourse on the legacy of slavery and its effect upon black men. In a system that fails to meet their cultural and psychological needs, they are left spiritually, economically, and morally bankrupt:

“We black men have failed to protect our women since the
time of slavery. We stay here in the South and are broken,
or we run away and leave them alone to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious circle – which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and maybe even tries to change it, it is too heavy a burden because of all the others who have run away and left their burdens behind. So he, too, must run away if he is to hold on to his sanity and have a life of his own.” (167)

He continues his argument on the legacy of cultural flight:

“Who does my aunt have? She has never been married. She raised my mother because my mother’s mother, who was her sister, gave my mother to her when she was only a baby, to follow a man whom the South had run away. Just as my own mother and my own father left me with her. . . . [T]he children in the quarters look at their fathers, their grandfathers, their uncles, their brothers – all broken. They see me – and I, who grew up on that plantation, can teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. I can give them something that neither a husband, a father, nor a grandfather ever did, so they want to hold on as long as they can. Not realizing that their holding on will break me, too. That in order for me to be what they think I am, what they want me to be, I must run as the others have done in the past.” (167)

As Grant explains the flight theory to Vivian, he begins, at that precise moment, to understand the depth and importance of his appointment as the “chosen one.” Their relationship gives him the confidence to acknowledge his own intellectual weaknesses as those weaknesses relate to the true meaning of being a “teacher.” What Jefferson’s godmother wants, he argues, is for someone – Grant and Jefferson – to “change everything that has been going on for three hundred years . . . so in case she ever gets out
of her bed again, she can go to that little church in the quarter and say proudly, ‘You see, I told you – I told you he was a man’ . . . [A]nd if she dies after that, all right’ (167). What Miss Emma needs to know most of all, he continues, is that Jefferson “did not crawl to that white man, that he stood at that last moment and walked. Because if he does not, she knows that she will never get another chance to see a black man stand for her” (167).

When Vivian asks if the cycle of generational flight “will ever be broken” (167) she asks on behalf of the legions of black men who are part – or might become part – of the legacy, men who are not only physically trapped in their surroundings but also psychologically trapped within themselves. Although Jefferson is behind bars, Grant is in prison. His mental imprisonment, concedes Gaines, stems partially from hatred of his environment; but more specifically it results from an imposed self-hatred. Grant, Gaines says, “hates teaching. He hates the South. He hates everything around him” (Mozart and Leadbelly, 57). In the 1940’s, Gaines explains, professions for blacks in the South were extremely limited.

“You could be a teacher and teach black children. You could be an undertaker, a barber, an insurance collector from other blacks. You could own a small grocery store or a nightclub. But you could not be an attorney or a doctor. You could not be a banker or a politician and certainly you could not run for political office. Not in a small place like this [Point Coupee, Louisiana] in the South at that time.” (58)

Even though Grant is a victim of the environment as much as Jefferson, it is up to Jefferson, he has come to believe, to halt the cycle of victimization. Jefferson can do this, Grant reasons, if he frees himself from the psychological shackles of oppression.

Just as he has a mandate to rescue Jefferson from the depths of sorrow and despair, Grant must now rely on his own wiles to secure a venue for that rescue to occur. It is not enough that he simply believes that such a metamorphosis will occur. He is aware that Jefferson will not gain a sense of himself simply by conversing periodically about mundane subjects. Insignificant conversations have not resulted in Jefferson’s
uplift and psychological movement to manhood. Jefferson, Grant feels, needs more to help Jefferson arrive at a place of peace and healing. Jefferson needs to know within himself that he is capable of not only executing the wishes of his aunt for his aunt, but also that the mental transition must occur for him as well. Jefferson, surmises Grant, must accentuate his own presence and validity. Twice-weekly conversations and visits to the jail do not convey Jefferson’s true emotions, nor are they testimonials of his mental state.

As Jefferson’s emotional needs are debated, so, too, are Grant’s. “Irene [Grant’s student] and my aunt,” Grant says, “want from me what Miss Emma wants from Jefferson. . . . [T]he state of Louisiana is about to take his life, but before that happens she wants something to remember him by. . . . [M]iss Emma needs a memory . . . memories of him standing like a man . . . if only for a day, an hour, here on earth” (LBD, 166). As Grant confides in Vivian, he recognizes that Tante Lou’s and Miss Emma’s presence in his life is – and has been – as influential as hers. Where he initially was content with the idea of fleeing the region – as so many others had done – he is now more understanding of his purpose in the community. Tante Lou’s composition, born out of her determination and will to survive the harsh realities of plantation life, is now part of his legacy, and Miss Emma’s quiet strength and fortitude are part of Jefferson’s. As the theme of generational surrogacy is represented by Munford Bazille, Hattie, and Proctor Lewis in “Three Men,” so, too, is it represented in A Lesson Before Dying by the women in Grant’s life.

As he continues to move toward a deeper understanding of his role in the community and his obligations to Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Vivian, Grant comes to appreciate and respect the honor, decency, and integrity each woman brings to everyone in the community. He understands the value of their presence in his life and how their voices and actions help shape his beliefs and mold him into the man he strives to become. As he accepts Vivian’s help in understanding his place in the community and his importance in the lives of others, he capitalizes on his position as a teacher by asking Jefferson, his former student, to self-investigate and reveal “what he’s thinking deep in him” (100). “Jefferson’s Diary,” a searing portrait of one man’s life of anguish, pain, and suffering, becomes the “memory” which Miss Emma so desperately needs to help alleviate the grief of losing her godson. On a more significant level the journal becomes
the physical record that Gaines hopes will help convert the lives of its readers and make them more cognizant of their inner selves.
Writing for Life:
“Jefferson’s Diary” as Transformative Text in
A Lesson Before Dying

We all know – at least intellectually – that we are going to die.
The difference is being told, ‘Okay, it’s tomorrow at 10 a.m. How do you react to that? How do you face it? That, it seems, to me, is the ultimate test of life.

--- Ernest J. Gaines

In A Lesson Before Dying Gaines extends the theme of manhood, a motif present in each of his seven works of fiction, through the inclusion of “Jefferson’s Diary” (chapter 29), the most critical chapter in the novel. The diary is the private notebook that Jefferson, the condemned man, keeps at the urging of Grant Wiggins, the plantation school teacher and the novel’s narrator. At the end of chapter 28, Gaines prepares the reader for the abrupt shift in language from standard, conventional English to the phonetic vernacular of Jefferson’s speech by extending a dialogue between the two men. Jefferson’s torrent of questions not only illustrates the frustration he carries as the recipient of an unjust penal system, they also speak to the issue of paternal discord. As the ritual of waiting for the execution becomes more pronounced, Grant, at the close of this chapter, empathizes with Jefferson’s plight, telling him, “I wish I knew what to do” (LBD, 223). In a final exchange with Grant, before the reader is introduced to the notebook, Jefferson bemoans the expectations from the community that he assume the psychological bearing of everyone who sees him as the victim. “Y’all asking a lot, Mr. Wiggins, from a poor old nigger who never had nothing” (222). He reiterates that he is “the one got to do everything. . . . Me, Mr. Wiggins. This old stumbling nigger. Y’all axe a lot, Mr. Wiggins” (223-24). Jefferson’s burdens to the community become heavier than the plight of his circumstances.

He internalizes his position as the “chosen one,” the single person in the community whose task is to sustain everyone’s strength and integrity, including white members of the community. From 21 years of near-invisibility, Jefferson now becomes the most visible resident in the community. His struggle, notes Doyle, is a psychological burden and a difficult task made more complicated because he must assume this new role “in the face of raw, southern justice” (Voices from the Quarters, 223). In “Jefferson’s
“Diary” Gaines suggests that because Jefferson internalizes white racism without having an external venue of expression, he also relinquishes an outward display of masculinity, accepting, instead, labels assigned him.

At the trial, Jefferson sits stoically as the defense attorney recounts the words of the dying white shopkeeper. Here is the novel’s first, direct reference to Jefferson’s masculinity: “The old man continued to call: Boy? Boy? Boy? . . . ” (LBD, 5). Gaines asserts that black men are not only fighting a majority social power that so often deems them insignificant and less than human: They are fighting for the right to be recognized as men in the larger society:

“In reading so much about why young black men are in prison today, so many are fighting over their manhood in the black community. . . . So much of it is our psyche: ‘I’ve got to be a man, I’ve got to be a man, I’ve got to be a man.’ And of course our mothers, when we’re born, it’s ‘my little man,’ and we want him to be a better person than his father. ‘You’re the man. You’re the man. You’re man.’ So the ‘man stuff’ is always around.” (Interview, 2006)

Long before Jefferson mimics the antics of an animal by kneeling on his cell floor and snorting like a hog, the defense attorney disparages him by referring to him as a “thing” and a “fool”:

“Gentlemen of the jury, look at this – this – boy. I almost said man, but I can’t say man. Oh, sure he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this – a man? No. Not I. I would call it a boy and a fool. A fool is not aware of right and wrong. A fool does what others tell him to do. A fool got into that automobile. A man with a modicum of intelligence would have seen that those racketeers meant no good. But not a fool.” (LBD, 7)

The defense attorney continues his humiliation of Jefferson:

“A fool got into that automobile. A fool rode to the grocery
store. A fool stood by and watched this happen, not having the sense to run. . . . [W]hat you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn. That is what you see here.” (7)

In the span of a few agonizing minutes before the entire community, Jefferson is publicly dehumanized. Gaines’ construct of Jefferson as a semi-illiterate field hand is significant, because it presents Jefferson the opportunity to rise above the words of the defense attorney and teach himself and others about dignity, self-respect, strength, and integrity. His intellectual limitations do not negate the knowledge of his own humanity. As he faces death he also defends his right to be recognized as a human even though he, too, sees little value in himself. Jefferson speaks compassionately about his own humanity. He thinks so little of himself until he had come to believe that he was a “nobody.”

“I’m youman [i. e., human], Mr. Wiggins. But nobody didn’t know that ‘fore now. . . . [Y]ou never thought I was nothing else. I didn’t neither. Thought I was doing what the Lord had put me on this earth to do.” (224)

Jefferson’s mandate from Grant, to die with dignity, is a monumental request, and as he contemplates the weight of the task, he declares the overwhelming burden of the challenge and questions the wisdom of Grant’s appeal, using the biblical analogy of Jesus on the cross to underscore his point:

“Me, Mr. Wigigns. Me. Me to take the cross. Your cross, nannan’s cross, my own cross. . . . [W]ho ever car’d my cross, Mr. Wiggins? My mama? My daddy? They dropped me when I was nothing. Still don’t know where they at this minute. I went in the field when I was six, driving that old water cart. I done pulled that cotton sack, I done cut cane, swing that ax, chop ditch banks, since I was six.” (224)

Grant’s flawed notion that Jefferson is “more a man” than he, because Jefferson acknowledges his fate, contrasts the condemned man’s uncertainty of the pain and the
process of the upcoming execution. In the following exchange between the two men, Grant acknowledges that he has no answers regarding the upcoming execution, using the backdrop of education and his position as a teacher to support his lack of any real knowledge of the ominous action:

“What it go’n feel like, Mr. Wiggins?”
I shook my head. I felt my eyes burning.
“I hope it ain long.”
“It’s not long, Jefferson,” I said.
“How you know, Mr. Wiggins?”
“I read it.” (225)

The significance of Jefferson’s comment, at the close of chapter 28, that he is “all right” (225) serves a dual purpose. It shows him to be in the preliminary stage of owning the consequences of his actions as well as introduces the reader to “Jefferson’s Diary,” at nine pages, the most compact chapter in the novel.

Written in the dialect of the 1940’s, southern Louisiana region, “Jefferson’s Diary” shows that while language can be used to construct reality, it can also be used to deconstruct and redefine it. Jefferson uses words to acknowledge his humanity, reconstruct his identity, and position himself as a community hero. Before he begins writing in the notebook he constructs a narrative chain extending back to his childhood to situate himself within a historical framework of his childhood and life on the plantation. He recounts that he was “. . . Cuss for nothing. Beat for nothing. . . . [G]rinned to get by. Everybody thought that’s how it was s’pose to be. . . .” (224). The declaration positions the reader for Jefferson’s journey of conversion from boy to man.

At the trial his insignificance is collectively assumed by the system that condemns him to death. Much like the residents of the community who have come to witness the outcome of the trial, he is a quiet observer and does not speak for himself. He is not permitted to speak on his own behalf once he has been pronounced guilty. Grant’s request for him to keep a notebook of his thoughts – and Jefferson’s acceptance of the appeal – signals the first time Jefferson has the opportunity to alter the public image and adopt an identity independent of the racist system which proclaims him inhuman. By substituting a choice to speak with an opportunity to engage in written discourse, Grant
gives Jefferson an opportunity to reclaim his public persona. The occasion also gives him
the encouragement to tell his story in his own voice and the chance to articulate the
history of his life and the events leading to his incarceration. The journal not only
presents a mental challenge for Jefferson: it is a profoundly new experience for him,
because, as he claims in the journal’s opening entry, he has never been asked to perform a
task outside the boundaries of working on the plantation. In the community of field
workers his identity is rooted in the performance of menial labor.

As a plantation worker, his most enduring trait is the ability to act on command.
He is, notes Gaines, intellectually restricted, having “limited education and a limited
vocabulary. Everything about him was limited” (Interview, 2006). Gaines further
maintains that because of Jefferson’s mental limitations, he, Jefferson, must claim
himself through his own voice. Gaines says:

“We don’t know too much about him. We are getting
some information through Grant, but we don’t know
too much about him . . . so what I thought [to give
Jefferson] is an entire chapter devoted to his thinking.
I wanted to let him tell it, and let him tell it in the only
way that was possible for him to do it.” (Interview, 2006)

The trajectory of “Jefferson’s Diary” moves from Jefferson’s sense of invisibility to a
man who gradually becomes aware of his legacy and obligation, not only to himself but
to the community as well. Following the jury’s declaration of guilt, Jefferson’s public
persona intensifies. The image, however, fails to capture Jefferson’s true self. Gaines
further asserts that up to the point of the diary the reader knows very little about Jefferson
and is therefore left to make assumptions about him:

“We hear about how everyone feels about Jefferson.
We hear how Aunt Emma feels, we hear how Tante
Lou feels, we hear how the sheriff feels, we hear how
Grant feels, and we even hear how the children feel.
But we never hear how Jefferson feels. We never hear
Jefferson’s voice.” (Interview, 2006)
In writing the novel Gaines contends that he felt that the reader “had to know him [Jefferson] better. Once I decided he would be executed, I knew since he would not reveal his thoughts to someone; still, in some way, he had to give the reader some information” (Mozart and Leadbelly, 60-61). Jefferson, of course, is “barely literate. . . . He was barely able to write his elementary school assignments. But now, with his pencil and notebook, he tries to define his humanity. . . ” (61). Jefferson does not know, however, even the basics of putting words on paper. His dilemma is great, but his determination is greater. Gaines summarizes the condemned man’s confusion:

“He does not know whether to write above the lines
or across the lines, so he does both. He does not erase.
He does not capitalize. He uses no punctuation marks.
He writes what comes into his mind. He writes at
night when he has light, because he does not want
others to see him doing so during the day. He writes
the night before his execution because the sheriff
promises him that he can have all the light he wants on
his last night.” (61)

While the opening passage of the diary informs the reader of Jefferson’s limited exposure to written communication, it also represents his first attempt to convey meaningful thought outside the defense attorney’s description and the community’s perspective of him. The challenge he faces is daunting, and he admits his dilemma in the diary’s opening line: “i dont know what to rite. . . . i dont know what to put on paper cause i ain never rote a leter in all my life cause nanan use to get chirren to rite her leter and read her leter for her not me. . . ” (226). The first presentation of Jefferson’s voice shows an earnest attempt at self-expression. Despite the poor grammar, phonetic spelling, and errors in punctuation, the passage testifies to his efforts to fulfill a request, but it also shows his willingness to begin an earnest examination of himself. Although his statements lack thematic unification, the stream-of-consciousness writing highlights a conscientious ability to separate individual thought as evidenced by the multiple divisions throughout the journal. This level of writing suggests that he carries a myriad of emotions regarding himself, the community, and the oppressive system in which he finds himself.
As the opening entries suggest, his initial concerns center on God’s benevolence as he faces death. To Jefferson, God is unjust for “messing wit po folks who aint never done nothin but try an do all they kno how to serv him” (227). According to him “the lord just work for wite folk cause ever sens i wasn nothin but a little boy i been on my on haulin water to the fiel on that ol water cart wit all them dime buckets an that dipper . . . ” (228). In his continued stream-of-consciousness writing, he injects the voice and antics of “Boo,” one of the plantation’s farm workers, who keeps “blasfemin the lord” (228) as he waits in the hot sun beneath a shade tree for Jefferson’s water-cart delivery: “how com he dont giv a man a little breeze if he so mercful. . . ” (228). The entry’s strong ending not only shows that Jefferson is aware of God’s power, but he also feels compelled to include – and thus ingest – Boo’s belief that God “dont love nobody but wite folks cause you they god not mine” (228). The inclusion suggests that he and Boo, two men of similar mental capacities, share parallel beliefs about God, but Boo has the temerity to publicly expose his beliefs while Jefferson is left to transfer the memory of the blasphemy onto the pages of his notebook. As Jefferson questions the righteousness and mercifulness of God, he momentarily removes himself from the entries and directs an angry inquisition to God about His mercilessness. Instead of “messin wit” (227) him, Jefferson wants to know, “how come he dont come here an take way people like them matin brothers on the st charl river” (227).

In his final condemnation of God’s lack of goodness and mercy in the lives of black people, he projects, vicariously, through Boo’s rant, that “. . . no niger aint got no god” (228) – that this, too, is the way he feels. Boo, whom Jefferson allows to subconsciously “speak” for him in the journal, is, in Jefferson’s view, also a son of the plantation because he “always boght us [the children in the quarters] candy an cake” (228). In allowing Boo to “speak,” in Jefferson’s diary Gaines engages what Marcia Gaudet calls “reported speech,” which occurs when “speech is reported by someone else” (ML, 149). Boo’s status, like Jefferson’s, is small in comparison to the larger, overall contribution to and distribution of labor on the plantation.

In Jefferson’s configuration of God’s lack of benevolence, he compares his imminent death with God’s disapproval of him – and thus all poor blacks who have done “all they know how to serv him” (227). God’s love of whites, in Jefferson’s perspective,
is greater than His love of the socially and economically disenfranchised who honor, worship, and devote their lives to Him. Even though he questions God’s mercy he writes from the perspective of a man who has experienced the ritual of church services and has been in the company of devout Christian believers. His view of reality is not seen exclusively through the prism of justice versus injustice but through the reality of the lives of the residents on the plantation whose meager existence parallels his life. Jefferson’s blackness automatically declares him guilty. His rant against God contrasts with the religious deportment of Reverend Ambrose, the plantation preacher who “christened babies, baptized youths visited those who were ill, counseled those who had trouble, preached, and buried the dead” (101). The theme of white and black is never more evident than in Grant’s observation of the racial injustice of Jefferson’s sentence:

Twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. Justice? . . . [T]hey sentence you to death because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, with no proof that you had anything at all to do with the crime other than being there when it happened. Yet six months later they come and unlock your cage and tell you, We, us, white folks all, have decided it’s time for you to die, because this is the convenient date and time. (157-58)

While Grant must learn to temper his resistance to the judicial edict, Reverend Ambrose’s primary objective is for Jefferson to become more accepting of his fate by allowing God into his life.

An expose’ of theological differences and a clash between central figures are signature motifs in Gaines’ canon. The religious dispute that eight-year-old James witnesses between the young scholar and the older, lay preacher in “The Sky is Gray,” for example, parallels the psychological beliefs that Jefferson shares with Reverend Ambrose, the plantation’s veteran preacher. Reverend Phillip Martin, the charismatic and politically active preacher in In My Father’s House, brings an old-school political and religious agenda to the younger generation of activists in the community who see
political protests and staid religious doctrines running counter to their contemporary beliefs.

Reverend Ambrose’s approach to converting Jefferson rests in his ability to convince the condemned man that his salvation depends solely in his belief that there exists a higher being who will “save” his soul before he meets his ultimate fate. He tells Grant that Jefferson “needs God in that cell, and not that sin box [the small radio that Grant gives Jefferson]” (LBD, 181). By questioning God’s lack of mercy for him and any notions of salvation, however, Jefferson shows that not only does he possess the mental capacity to formulate judgments about his fate and his connection to a higher being. He has, according to Herman Beavers, the “resources needed to meet death” (Wrestling Angels into Song, 175-76).

As Jefferson struggles with a multitude of emotions, reflecting upon his abandonment at birth underscores his effort to move forward. Just like Proctor Lewis in “Three Men” (Bloodline) Jefferson’s abandonment by his parents is a great source of pain. It reinforces his sense of “nothingness” and deprives him of the emotional strength he needs to help him differentiate between the concept of love and the ethics of work. Gaines theorizes on the legacy of slavery in relationship to the psychological disconnect between fathers and sons:

“Every since fathers and sons were separated on the [slave] auction block, they’ve not made a connection. Too often fathers cannot help the sons. African American fathers do not send us [black people] to war. They’re very seldom our judges when we’re standing at trial. . . . [T]hey don’t represent us when we’re in the courtroom. We often blame him without realizing that he’s never been given that opportunity to defend us. . . . [W]hen it comes to defending our families, some way or another the white man makes all of those decisions, and that separates father and son.” (Interview, 2006)

The parental separation which Jefferson feels is further evident as he moves closer to his own emotional balance, and in a rare declaration he admits to Grant a fear or affirmation:
“... mr wigin i just feel like tellin you i like you but
i dont know how to say this cause i aint never say it to
nobody befor an nobody aint never say it to me i kno
i care for nanan but i dont kno if love is care cause cuttin
wood and haulin water and things like that i dont know
if thats love or jus work to do an you say thats love but
you say you know i got mo an jus that to say an when i
lay ther at nite and cant sleep i try an think what you mean
i got mo cause i aint done this much thinkin and this
much writin in all my life befor.” (LBD, 228-29)

Jefferson’s words show that even though he struggles with the concept of
emotional love versus the physical expression of love, he tries to reconcile how each
complements the other. At Grant’s request that he continue to go “deep inside” he
represses a show of affection for Grant but acknowledges his affection for his godmother,
Miss Emma. He claims to want to “see her one mo time on this earth fore i go...”
(229), but he also asks “is that love mr wigin when you want see somebody bad bad”
(229). His attachment to his godmother reflects the words of the defense attorney:

“Gentlemen of the jury, who would be hurt if you took
this life?... [W]hat you see there has been everything
to him – everything... [T]ake this away from her, and
she has no reason to go on living. We may see him as not
much, but he’s her reason for existence.” (8)

Jefferson’s ability to question his emotions indicates an earnest attempt to understand his
humanity. He continues to debunk the notion that others may view him as “not much” (9)
by continuing to “go deep” (228) inside himself.

His emotional breakdown, following a visit by members of the community,
startles him, but in the aftermath he maintains a sense of pride. Crying liberates him from
a wealth of pent-up emotions. He is no longer afraid to cry, as he expresses the action
numerous times throughout the entry. The children’s dignity and bravery is the catalyst
that truly begins Jefferson’s metamorphosis:

“mos was brave an spoke an my little cosin estel
even com up an kiss me on the jaw an i coudn hol
it back no mo . . . this was the firs time i cry when
they lok that door behind me the very firs time an i
jus set on my bunk cryin but not let them see or yer
me cause i didn want them think rong but i was cryin
cause . . . the peple com to see me caus they hadn never
done nothing lik that for me befor.” (230-31)

As Grant consistently appeals to Jefferson to continue writing, Jefferson begins to understand his self-worth, his importance to the community, and his place in society. Grant’s desire is for Jefferson to view himself not simply as a black man but as a man whose current circumstance is a result of an unfair judicial system in general and a racist society in particular. As Jefferson forces himself to think, writing in the notebook helps him dismantle white notions of black masculinity and reconstruct his concept of manhood. Grant continues to nurture and encourage him to say things, as he confesses in the journal, he “aint tellin nobody” (226). The diary thus becomes the agent for Jefferson’s evolution from invisible plantation hand to a viable human being. It serves not only as an effective inducement for Grant: it also works in this capacity for the jailers who become unwitting participants in Jefferson’s development.

Writing gives Jefferson a temporary measure of superiority over an oppressive system which deems him incapable of rational thought and behavior. As he writes in the journal, he subtly observes his surroundings, and he quietly studies the character of the men in his environment. From the early stages of writing, he notices the pretentiousness of some of the jailers:

“ole clark been coming roun too tryin to act like a
youman but i can see in his face he aint no good an
i dont even look at him when he ax if im doing all
rite and can he git me somthin no i just go on ritin
in my tablet.” (230)

As Jefferson writes he also discerns the deputies’ sincerity. His incarceration gives him the fortitude to accept or deny favors from the jailers.
His dismissal of the jailer’s offer is significant in two respects: He consciously engages in a southern code of conduct where blacks are forbidden to look directly into the eyes of white people with whom they speak. Yet, also, by continuing to write in the journal without acknowledging the jailer’s presence, he ignores the jailer and the words he speaks. Jefferson, the invisible, black field hand, very subtly controls his personal space according to his own agenda. Continuing to write in the journal is more significant to him than conversing with the jailer. By his own design he subtly dismisses his oppressors while buttressing his own self-esteem. He remains the prisoner in the cell, but he also becomes the gatekeeper of his space. As the theme of black and white is conveyed throughout the diary, the white jailers are now “invisible” to Jefferson. Jefferson, the “thing,” now has presence. The journal not only operates as a recorder of his life. It represents a temporary sanctuary from a system of racial oppression, serves as a refuge from the constant thought of his impending death, and comforts him during his most vulnerable moments.

As he continues writing, the racial dynamics at the jail slowly begin to change. His determination to “jus go on ritin” (223) shows a subtle shift in power. The intensity with which he writes alters the social terrain and, to a small degree, transforms the people upon whom he is dependent. The physical presence of the notebook places him in a position of command over his oppressors, allowing him to quietly negotiate the boundaries of his circumstances as he constructs his own identity. As the writing reflects his ability to “speak,” his muteness is now replaced by a temporary control of his circumstances. With the closing of each entry in the diary Jefferson slowly moves from victim to survivor. The jailers’ response to Jefferson’s needs is a combination of the guilt they feel in knowing an innocent man is being put to death: but more importantly it is their desire to avoid being demonized in the writing.

Sheriff Guidry, a representative figure of the racist network of southern white law enforcement officials charged with overseeing black prisoners, seeks validation of his righteousness as well as a proper accounting for his deputies’ moral behavior. This notion of white guilt drives him to examine his conscience, because he wants Jefferson’s words to reflect how humane he has been treated under his watch. Sheriff Guidry unknowingly becomes part of Jefferson’s text, and in doing so becomes a participant in – and shares in
the victory of – Jefferson’s psychological will to survive. By offering himself as a verbal companion to Jefferson’s words, he unconsciously submerges himself in Jefferson’s power, becoming, ironically, part of a perceived black racial inferiority. Jefferson’s deliberately monotonous responses to the jailers’ offers prevent him from engaging in a lengthy discourse with the sheriff while also respectfully affirming the sheriff’s sense of racial superiority. In jail, Jefferson learns how to direct the path of his existence and peacefully negotiate the terms of his own life:

“shef guiry come by after i et an ax me how im doing an i say im doin all right an he ax me he say i aint never pik up yo tablet an look in it an he ax what all i been ritin an i tol him jus things an he say aint he done tret me rite an i tol him yessir an he say ain he done let the chirren an all the peple from the quarter com an vist me jus two days ago and i say yesir an he say good put that down in yo tablet.” (223)

In the same passage he includes the sheriff’s final appeal that he be portrayed as “genuine” for providing Jefferson special treatment:

“i tret you good all the time you been yer an he say he had to go hom cause he hadn et his super yet but for me to call a depty if i need somthin an he ax me if i want the lite to stay on all nite in case i want rite som mo an i tol him yesir an he say all rite i could have all the lite I want.” (223)

The sheriff’s final statement, that Jefferson can have “all the lite” (223) he wants, not only extends one of the chapter’s theme of light versus darkness and black versus white, it contradicts Jefferson’s fate. As the date of the execution approaches, his gradual detachment from life is exposed in the diary’s closing passages. The entries become sparse and the tone more reflective, indicating, for the first time, Jefferson’s acknowledgment of the inappropriate choice he made that led to his incarceration. He concedes that he “ain had no bisnes goin there wit brother an bear cause they aint no
good” (223). As the diary’s only reference to the crime, the admission implies that, previous to the episode at the liquor store which led to Jefferson’s trial and eventual incarceration, he had the capacity to differentiate between right and wrong. But now, as he awaits execution, he has a chance to reflect upon the choice he made.

Equally important in the acknowledgment is the statement “cause they [Brother and Bear] aint no good” (223). The declaration suggests that he separates himself psychologically from the men’s conduct, while agreeing that he is indeed a “good” person who made an improper decision during a vulnerable moment. His use of the active voice implies that he is still responding in present time to the episode even though he has not completely reached the point of fully accepting his imminent death.

While Jefferson’s writing does not conform to the conventions of standard, written English, it is an insightful commentary on human frailties. His initial reluctance to write, born out of a fear of the unknown and lack of literacy skills, is gradually replaced by a subtle indifference and resignation to his fate. His claim that he does not care who read his words after he is “dead and gone” (230) not only signals the approaching closure of the diary, it also suggests that death will be the ultimate release of any unresolved fears and sorrows. By his own hand, Jefferson creates his own, personal narrative, putting to rest preconceived notions of who and what he is. As Marcia Gaudet points out in Porch Talk with Ernest J. Gaines, Jefferson’s words “alter the alternative version of the stories told about him” (182). As his words show, he slowly detours from communal attachment, fostered by the perception that he is a mere field hand, to become a writer whose emotional growth becomes stronger each day he confronts his own mortality.

His emotional strength is critically important to his mental survival, and he now claims both as he nears the date of the execution, set by the governor of the state of Louisiana, as “the second Friday after Easter” (LBD, 156). In a first-ever display of emotion, initiated by his godmother, Jefferson accepts her embrace without apprehension and acknowledges its impact. His movement from fear of emotional revelation with Grant to expressing his love to Miss Emma is a critical step in his journey to manhood. Verbally expressing his love and allowing her to embrace him “lon is she want” (231) is a significant statement as he seeks to move forward. The entry is more than an affirmation
of his love for his godmother: It testifies that he is indeed aware of the physical toll his incarceration has taken upon her:

“when they brot me in the room an i seen nanan at the table i seen how ole she look an how tied she look and i tol her i love her an i tol her i was strong an she jus look ole and tied and pull me to her an kiss me an it was the firs time she never done that an it felt good an i let her hold me lon is she want cause you [Grant] say it was good for her.” (231)

Even though Jefferson feels the power between them, he does not readily admit that his godmother’s embrace is “good for him,” too. Recognizing the impact of his circumstances upon her, he concludes the passage by affirming his strength while unconsciously noting that she does not need to return to the jail:

“i was strong an she didn need to come back no mo cause i was strong an she jus set ther wit her eyes most shet like she want to go to sleep lookin at me all the time til reven and mis lou have to hep her up an take her back home.” (231)

As he moves into the final hours he writes of his desire to “see the sun one mo time” (232). The consistent use of the word “sun” symbolizes the diminishing days of his life, and as he notices the brightness of the sun, “the moon out there” (233) and the “leves on the tree” (233), he also comes to terms with the fact that despite how he feels about death and God and the unfairness of his life, he is going to die, and will “sleep a long time after tomoro . . . aint gon see no mo leves after tomoro” (233). His observations are an acknowledgment of his separation from God’s creations and an admission that he is ready to enter a different sphere. From his former position as a plantation worker to his present status as the jailhouse scribe, writing places him outside the boundaries of his fears and allows him to move, as Beavers notes, “into a space where he ponders the meaning of death” (WAS, 176).

Jefferson’s movement into a different, psychological place assumes a critical urgency as he returns full circle to the historical narrative of his life. He revisits his
previous claim of working as the plantation’s water boy, where he only “rode the cart” (LBD, 234). As he faces death, he can now set forth his claim to manhood, and in doing so dispel the notion of who he used to be (a water boy) and what he has been called: a hog, a fool, and a “thing.” His assertion that he has “to be a man an set in a cher” (234) dismantles his earlier claim of being “nothing else” (234). His declaration of intent does not go unnoticed by Grant, who observes, during a pensive moment, that Jefferson now stands “big and tall, and not stooped as he had been in chains” (225). As Jefferson constructs a new identity in the confines of a regulated space, he transfers aspects of his social grounding into written discourse. In the process he redefines his image as merely a “cornered animal” (7) into that of a man who is now ready to stand and make, what Gaines calls, “the ultimate sacrifice” (Interview, 2006).

Jefferson’s words are not a universal statement about the plight of incarcerated black men. His words are an expression of humility and his ability to recognize and accept the immediacy of death in a community where he is progressively being looked upon as a symbol of change. The muted voice now “speaks” with affection and compassion and reflects upon his immediate surroundings. His words, as Doyle notes, “express puzzlement, fear, hope, and love” (VQ, 224). Unpunctuated and free-flowing, Jefferson’s words indicate an emotional urgency lain dormant for years but now, through the act of written discourse, explodes upon the pages of the notebook. Through the power of language, contends Doyle, Jefferson “escapes one prison house, achieves his manhood, and produces a text to guide others” (224).

In one of the novel’s most essential passages, Grant offers Jefferson a lesson on the myth of white supremacy and Jefferson’s obligation to help dispel the notion. As a reluctant son of the South, a frustrated Grant thrusts his anger upon anyone within his circle. He directs animosity toward Reverend Ambrose for trying to convince him that God is the answer to Jefferson’s plight, and he foists it upon Vivian, Tante Lou, and Miss Emma – who capitalize on his gender and position in the community – to convince him that he has the most “knowledge” to carry forth the lessons on manhood. His youth and status as a single man, his former teacher-student association with Jefferson, and his convenient accessibility convince everyone that he is capable of bringing about Jefferson’s “change.”
A lesson about “standing” does as much for Grant as it does for Jefferson. If Jefferson, the incarcerated man, is able to show, as Ed Piacentino claims, the “common humanity that is in us all,” then Grant, the free man, will not, in his own fear of standing up to the powers of a racially oppressive system, be made to show man’s “common humanity.” The semi-illiterate fieldworker is commissioned by the educated teacher not only to teach a lesson to the community on the importance of maintaining dignity in the face of all odds, but also to teach the difference between truth and deception. As Grant has a tall order to fill as the plantation’s “chosen one,” so, too, does Jefferson, whose appointment is equally as challenging.

Grant implores Jefferson to make a statement by standing tall:

“A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they’re better than anyone else on earth – and that’s a myth. The last thing they ever want to see is a black man stand, and think. . . . It would destroy their myth. They would no longer have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in. As long as none of us stand, they’re safe. . . . I don’t want them to feel safe with you anymore. . . . I want you to chip away at that myth by standing.” (LBD, 192)

Grant tells Jefferson that he “could never be a hero. I teach, but I don’t like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the South today. I don’t like it; I hate it. I don’t even like living here. I want to run away. . . . I need you much more than you could ever need me” (192-93). In trying to convince Jefferson of his own needs, he tells him that he needs to “know what to do with my life” (193):

“I want to run away, but go where and do what? I’m needed here and I know it, but I feel that all I’m doing here is choking myself. I need someone to tell me what to do. I need you to tell me, to show me. I’m no hero; I can just give something small. That’s all I have to offer. It is the
only way that we can chip away at that myth. You – can be
taller than anyone you have ever met.” (193)

Near the end of his life, Jefferson, forever the dutif ul servant, surrenders to
Grant’s request that he “chip away at the myth” (192). By disabling the notion of his
inferiority, Jefferson, maintains Doyle, is able to elevate himself from a “lowly and
unpromising beginning” (VQ, 223) to a figure of significant acclaim by everyone who
discounts his capabilities. With this new status he has the opportunity to emerge as the
sainted son of the community. His martyrdom will come, ironically, as a result of the
system that oppresses him.

In a symbolic play on words, Gaines captures the ultimate objective of Jefferson’s
goal: to be recognized as a man. Throughout the diary, the word “human” is spelled
“youman.” The phonetic spelling suggests that Jefferson subconsciously says to himself,
as he wishes for the community to declare, “You, Jefferson, are a man.” Conjoined, the
words confirm Jefferson’s status as an individual. As the community has served witness
to the defense attorney’s pronouncement of Jefferson’s inhumanity, it is particularly
important to Jefferson that the community knows that he is indeed a man. By writing his
own narrative he rejects the derogatory labels and declares his own identity. Such an
action will, in his psyche, cast aside any lingering doubts of him as a “thing,” a “fool,”
and an “it.” In the notebook’s last entry, he directs Grant to “speak” to the community on
his behalf: “tell them im strong tell them im a man” (LBD, 234). His use of the pronoun
“them” not only references the people in his emotional circle – his godmother and Tante
Lou, specifically – but also those persons who are responsible for proclaiming him guilty
and declaring his fate: the all-white jury and, by extension, the entire racist system of
injustice. The repetition of “tell them” – within the short span of the statement – signals
his strong resolution as well as the profoundness and immediacy of the request.

In singling out Paul for the notebook’s delivery to Grant, the request shows that
Jefferson not only trusts the jailer and appreciates his treatment of him as a human being,
but he recognizes Paul to be “the only one rond yer kno how to talk like a youman to
peple” (230). Jefferson is able to distinguish Paul’s genuine behavior from the pseudo
compassion of the other jailers, and in the diary he “speaks” to the men in power
regarding their integrity and character, making sure he calls by name the men from whom
he feels most alienated: “i kno ole clark an i know you too shef guiry an you mr picho and mr mogan an all the rest of yall i jus never say non of this befor but i kno yall ever las one of yall” (230). Even though Jefferson does not offer a previous assessment of the men’s character, his claim of knowing “ever las one of yall” (230) is not only a denouncement of the men who oversee his welfare but also an indictment of the racist system in which he finds himself incarcerated. As he has asked Grant to report to the general community that he is a man, it is important that he “calls out,” in writing, the persons whom he knows are racists but are pretending, owing to the circumstances, to be otherwise: “ole clark,” “shef guiry,” “mr picho,” and “mr mogan” (230). Because he has not heretofore had an opportunity or reason to “say non of this befor” (230), he now utilizes the journal to secure a permanent voice – not only in the community but perhaps in the hearts and minds of the men as well.

As he seeks to return the favor to a community which “hadn never done nothin” (231) for him before their visit to the jail, he unearths the humanity of his own fragmented life. According to Gaines, “Jefferson’s Diary” is the most prominent chapter in the novel, because “once you read the diary it’s uplifted your heart, if you had a heart. He’s uplifted you, and he tells you how he feels. That is the turning point, that little light that [James] Joyce speaks of, that epiphany. That brings light to the entire story” (Interview, 2006). Jefferson, he adds “is not going to be this coward they’ll have to drag. He’s not going to eat a whole gallon of ice cream with a pot spoon. He’s going to eat a little Dixie cup of ice cream. All of these little things elevate him – to salvation, to the uplifting of the soul” (ML, 156). As a narrative about communal bonds, the former water boy, who feels disenfranchised from the larger society, reconstructs himself as a viable member of the community, achieving, in his last hours, what he has been unable to achieve as a free man: a sense of visibility, pride, and integrity.

As the execution date approaches, the diary’s entries assume a fragmented solitude. The reversal from detailed, emotional explication seen earlier in the journal, to short, crisp statements suggests Jefferson’s resignation to his fate. His time on earth is about to expire; so, too, is his thinking at length about himself. In the emotional and physical grips of fear he manages, however, to keep writing in shorter bursts, warning Grant that his “han shakin” (LBD, 234) but bravely claiming that life is “for the livin an
not for me” (234). As he completes the journey to go inside himself, his observations and sensory perceptions become more acute. As he converses with Jefferson in the cell, he surrenders to the beauty of the scene beyond his window: “So pretty out there. . . . So pretty. I ain’t never seen it so pretty” (225).

His final entries assume a rhythmic, poetic quality, suggesting his emergence from the dark recesses of his psyche to a place of renewal and rebirth:

“day breakin
sun comin up
the bird in the tre soun like a blu bird
sky blu blu mr wigin.” (234)

His upward gaze suggests a final observation of all that remains of a life he is fated to leave. The design of the cell prevents him from seeing the bird, but it does not prevent him from imagining its color. The repeated emphasis on the color of the sky – “blu blu” – in a single line, implies a distinct meaning of “blue” as the word relates to Jefferson’s *expected* disposition. He only *hears* the sounds of the bird, but he is able to “see” beyond his immediate circumstance as he accepts the inevitable. Even though he questions God’s benevolence, he now appreciates the beauty of life and the sights and sounds emanating from His creations: the dawning of day, the distinct call of a bird, the magnificence of the color of the sky. No tone of remorse or regret claims Jefferson’s voice as he notices the “sun comin in the windo cause i can see it splashin on the flo” (226). The diary’s final entries show his unwavering strength and his reconciliation to his fate. Emerging from an attitude of cynicism, low self-esteem, insecurity, and fear, Jefferson now forms a final distinction between preconception and reality, the latter a result of his ability to reach farther into himself than he has ever done or been asked to do. An approaching death becomes Jefferson’s savior more than a sustained life on the plantation.

Jefferson’s diary, maintains Gaines, frames the novel and gives Jefferson the opportunity to not only to save himself by the strength of his own words, but also to permit himself to teach others the power of facing one’s fears. Poignantly, accepting his impending death is the only avenue left for him in the journey toward manhood. It is his imminent death, ironically, that gives him the strength to live psychologically
unrestricted for the first time in his life. He must continue to write until the appointed day
and hour, because the act sustains him and keeps him emotionally alive. “Nothing in his
life becomes him,” Doyle argues, “like the leaving of it. . . . [W]ithout his incarceration
that life would have continued to be an aimless trip” (VQ, 207).

In bringing the diary to an end, Jefferson may not fully understand the
significance of “sincerely,” the word with which he closes the journal. But he understands
that he uses it not only as a term of finality of a particular action but as an affirmation of
endearment. Most importantly, his writing speaks the truth and comes from his heart, and
in the circumstances of his situation, it means that not only is the journal complete, his
journey is complete. He has, as the diary indicates, no additional words to share and no
need to further extend himself.

While his ultimate goal is to walk to the execution chair with pride and dignity, he
also wants to enlarge the significance of this ultimate walk by refusing to speak. Because
the history of black men in the South falsely accused of crimes is not a new phenomenon,
Gaines maintains that he did not want Jefferson “trying to explain himself just before he
was going to be executed. No final words” (Interview, 2006). In the manner of
Jefferson’s muteness at the trial, he is determined to walk to his death with quiet dignity.
“That’s how I want to go, Mr. Wiggins. Not a mumbling word” (LBD, 223). Long after
he is “dead and gone” (230) the notebook will perhaps remain his voice.

From the diary’s commencement, where Jefferson proclaims that he “dont kno
what to rite” (226) to the end of the novel, he is a man on a journey of validation. As
Grant’s former student, he is aware that accolades are awarded for academic
achievement, and in this regard he seeks recognition for fulfilling the mandate of keeping
a notebook. In the preliminary stages of writing in the diary he implores Grant to
acknowledge his words: “mr wigin you say you like what i got here but you say you stil
cant giv me a a jus a b cause you say i aint gone deep in me yet” (228). He believes, early
in the writing process, that he has indeed gone deep within himself, not initially
understanding, however, the larger significance of the request: the need for self-
examination as a way of learning about oneself. Gaines asserts that writing serves a dual
purpose: “Writing is finding out things about oneself . . . and searching in ways to
understand yourself better” (Interview, 2006).
Midway the journal Jefferson thanks Grant for acknowledging his words, saying, “thank you for sayin im doin b+ work an you know the a aint too far” (LBD, 229). Jefferson’s insistence that his work receive the highest academic assessment speaks to his long-held desire for validation. He not only needs Grant’s substantiation for himself he needs it, in his final hours, for the community as well. All men, Gaines says, “would like to stand in the sun one day. They need that fifteen minutes of recognition. . . . [A]ll men do” (Interview, 2006). Jefferson’s diary will remind others that he was more than a man who was executed for a crime he did not commit. He hopes, too, to be remembered as more than a field hand who “git the peple they food an they water on time” (LBD, 227).

In his journal he exposes as much of his life on the printed page as he can, and he writes with a great sense of urgency. He must tell all that he knows of himself and all that he feels about himself. The voices of others – the defense attorney, the judge, the governor, the jailers, and plantation workers – will no longer define him. The journal is the last opportunity for him to declare his presence in the community. His words – raw, unvarnished, and unpretentious – define his life in the quarters as much as his work ethic defines his labor on the plantation. “We don’t know a man,” Gaines concedes, “until he speaks” (Interview, 2006).

“Jefferson’s Diary,” Gaines says, “is made up of small things, about the people he [Jefferson] knew and how they affected his life, about insignificant incidents. He thinks about justice and injustice. And he wonders about God. All this is written above and across the lines of his notebook, without capitalization and punctuation” (ML, 61). The writing shows a man’s enduring quest for visibility and recognition. As Jefferson bids Grant “good by” (LBD, 234), he speaks as a man who now values the importance of his own voice and understands the consequences of an unjust judicial system. As he prepares to make the most important walk in his life, he writes of his fear while also maintaining a strong constitution: “i been shakin an shakin but im gon stay strong i can yer my teefs hitin an i can yer my hart” (223). His pending death serves as a cultural function in the community, and his words are a document of protest against an unjust system of racial oppression. Contrary to early critics who maintained that Gaines’ work was not protest literature, “Jefferson’s Diary” dispels the claim.
If an element of humor can be found in Jefferson’s voice, it comes during the period of the grand visit by members of the community. His new-found skill of analysis has taught him to be more observant of his surroundings and of the people with whom he comes in contact, whether friend or foe. Following the visit by the schoolchildren, he asks “where all them peple come from” (230). The day room at the jail fills up quickly as he sits and accepts the graciousness of their visit:

“here com the ole folks an look like everbody from the quarter was here mis julia an joe an mis haret an ant agnes an mr noman an mis sara an mis lilia an mr harry an mis lea an god kno who all an mr ofal an miss felia wit her beeds an jus prayin an all the people sayin how good i look an lord have merce sweet jesus mr wigin how you got bok yer in that suit that suit look like it half bok siz cause i member mis rita got him that suit way back ten leben yers back an bok babbin ther like he kno me.” (230)

“Bok,” the plantation’s marble-obsessed manchild, wants to visit Jefferson because, according to Miss Rita, he feels the need to extend his hand in friendship. Like others in the quarters he, too, is affected by Jefferson’s plight. Clearly touched by Bok’s visit, Jefferson writes:

“he want say he glad to see me an he want give me one of hiss aggis an me jus lookin at bok shakin my hed an shakin my hed an i cant stop sayin ole bok ole bok ole bok you want give me one o you aggis but ole bok wound turn it loose til mis rita had to tell him let go bok few times an still bok wound turn loose till mis rita pri it out his han and han it to me an bok start babbin’ there til mis rita had to reach out her han for me to give it back to her an she giv it back to bok an bok put it back in his pocket . . . ole bok lookin way over yonder kep rattlin the marbles in his pocket . . . til he fond the litles one he had in his pocket an han me that.” (231)
Not only does Jefferson’s perspective on the visit bring a light-hearted aspect to a somber mood, the tale serves a more significant purpose. Miss Rita “reaching out her hand” symbolizes how the community extends itself to residents and how its members “give back” in times of need. More significantly, however, the scene represents the power of a community’s investment in one of its own.

Although Grant’s bond with Jefferson greatly affects him and is critically significant to his own growth as a man, he does not possess the strength or courage to attend the execution. When he returns to the children at the plantation school in the quarters he is visibly distraught but finds “his students are waiting, standing at attention, their shoulders back, heads high, to hear of the execution” (ML, 61). Although the children are greatly saddened at Jefferson’s fate, they assume the identical posture that Jefferson manages during the moments before his execution. They are strong, brave, and resolute. Jefferson’s death is the season’s lesson. *A Lesson Before Dying*, contends Gaines, “is not whether Jefferson is innocent or guilty but how he feels about himself at the end” (60). As Grant becomes the custodian of Jefferson’s written narrative, Jefferson’s diary will, one hopes, occupy a place of historical significance in the community and serve as a document to help others understand their own lives.
INTRODUCTION TO APPENDIX

From the Spoken Word to the Written Word:
Ernest J. Gaines’ Homage to the Ancestors

When Ernest J. Gaines was growing up in the quarters of the Point Coupee Parish in Oscar, Louisiana, entertainment came in the form of “galley [gallery] talk.” Residents in the community visited each other’s homes and exchanged tidbits of information throughout the evening, but when a lull in the conversations threatened the pace of the deliveries, stories would be “created.” As the oldest sibling in a large family of children, Gaines was responsible for caring for his crippled aunt Augustine Jefferson, but because she was unable to travel the distance to residents’ homes to engage in the festivities, community members congregated on her front porch. Ernest J. Gaines was an intensive listener, and from these narrative experiences became a renowned literary artist whose work captures the voices and passions of “his people.”

He gives much credit to Western writers, including Hemingway, Faulkner, and the Russian novelists Ivan Turgenev and Leroy Tolstoy; but his greatest influence comes from the storytellers in the quarters. Gaines’ work depicts myriad complexities of a culturally diverse community that includes blacks, whites, Cajuns, and Creoles. Moreover, each group embraces its own history. His work is a social and political commentary on race, class, gender, and the struggles and sacrifices of a disenfranchised group: black men who feel alienated from society and who see themselves as invisible in the larger context of their life. His fiction brings to the literature of the American South what Toni Morrison calls “an Africanist presence” (Playing in the Dark, 5): authentic dialects, convincing characterizations, and believable representations. A community’s triumphs, defeats, and weaknesses are the thematic elements that govern his work and give it a unifying setting and a significant layer of social realism. His stories give voice to individuals long silenced by racial oppression.

Gaines’ writing is firmly grounded in the folk culture of the region of his birth, and the diverse characters from his seven works of fiction – no matter their struggle – move with grace and dignity to a place of resolution in their lives. The central themes that occupy his work are personal responsibility, dignity, and courage. Sacrifice and hard
work are most often key principles that guide his characters to an understanding of themselves. From fragments of dialogue and the actions of characters, he hopes that readers are able to discern the differences between – and beyond – stereotypical treatments and true depictions of characters in southern literature.

Of Gaines’ most significant themes in his canon are theories of father and son separations. He traces the historical legacy of male detachment to slavery’s history and the emotional and psychological effects of black men being bonded out to slaveholders on the plantation. Two novels, In My Father’s House and Of Love and Dust, address the theme of the absent father and “plantation bonding,” respectively. Gaines, a fourth-generation son born in the quarters of the River Lake Plantation in 1933, centers his work on the community of elders who nurtured him until he left the plantation to join his mother and step-father in California in 1948. “I am what I am,” Gaines says of the old people in the community, “because of them” (Interview, 2006). He has a deep and abiding respect “for the land, the rivers, the bayous, and the swamps” of the region. His immense body of work mirrors this respect. Held in equally high regard is the land where homes were formerly located and the cemetery where his ancestors are buried. Gaines’ reverence for the land is evident in each of his fictional works.

Each year Gaines and his wife Dianne pay tribute to the ancestral legacy of life in the quarters with a Cemetery Beautification Day. Held on the grounds of the former quarters’ cemetery, tombs are cleaned and painted, flowers are planted, and debris is removed from the area. The ceremony, held on the last Saturday in October before All Saints Day (November 1st), allows more people from the region to participate. Word-of-mouth delivery, an oral tradition in Gaines’ childhood in the quarters, is the primary method of publicizing the annual event which began in 1998. A “fear of forgetfulness,” says the author’s wife, is what motivated Gaines to begin the tradition. Even though he is unable to pinpoint the exact location of his Aunt Augustine’s unmarked grave, he does know the general area within the space of two feet. His aunt, he says, was “the strongest person I knew” (Interview, 2006) and the model on which the majority of his female characters are constructed.

Gaines’ narratives, most often written in the first-person, chronicle the struggles of black protagonists against racism. Like the author, the characters in his short stories
and novels are fiercely attached to the land and have a sense of ownership to the region. Bayonne, the fictional setting of the majority of his work, is often compared to William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, and while Gaines is generous in recognizing Faulkner’s influence, he quickly clarifies their philosophical and psychological differences: “When it came to my characters reacting, it was my judgment as to how they would react, not Faulkner’s” (Interview, 2006). There are a lot of similarities between the writers’ treatment of life in the South. Gaines concedes, however, that “when you get down to the nitty-gritty, there were some differences there” (Interview, 2006).

The Louisiana region elicits Gaines’ imaginative gift, and he understands this as part of his southern heritage. He is acutely aware that many African American characters are – and have been – presented in subservient, demeaning, and unflattering positions in southern literature. While he has been criticized over the years for engaging the stereotype of black men and black women, failing to construct “traditional” protest fiction, and writing carefully orchestrated scenes and dialogue in an effort to secure a “safe” ending to the literary work, he defends his writing.

“Much of our history,” he claims, “has not been told; our problems have been told, as if we have no history” (Interview, 2006; emphasis Gaines’). The historical legacy of the Point Coupee Plantation weaves its way through Gaines’ fictional works. While other writers are free to tell their stories and “create” their own histories through dialogue, characters, and setting, Gaines’ front-porch memories provide a truthful accounting of the history and culture of the Point Coupee plantation.
APPENDIX
“The Scribe of River Lake Plantation”
An Interview with Ernest J. Gaines
by
Lillie Anne Brown
May 31, 2006
Oscar, Louisiana

Introduction (Recorded)

This is an interview with Ernest J. Gaines. I’m Lillie Anne Brown. I’ve entitled the interview “The Scribe of River Lake Plantation: An Interview with Ernest J. Gaines.” The date is May 31, 2006, and it is 10:15 a.m. (CST). I am temporarily staying at the private residence of Ernest and Dianne Gaines in Oscar, Louisiana. The home is situated across from the False River in Point Coupee Parish. Mr. Gaines has given me permission to record this interview, and the interview is being recorded on a Sony Clear Voice recorder. He has also consented to my use of this interview for publication purposes, which includes my dissertation at Florida State University in Tallahassee, FL, as well as for publication in literary, scholarly, and refereed journals.
The Interview

LAB  Writing is a process of discovery. As a writer, what are you still discovering about yourself?

EJG  I’m still discovering myself. I’m still finding out who I am, I’m still finding out my weakness, my prejudice, my strength. Through my characters, I’m finding myself. I try to create characters with character to better understand my own character and maybe help the character of the people who might read me. So I’m still trying to find out more about myself. I think that’s what writing is all about, finding out things about oneself. At the same time, of course, you’re writing to make money, if you can make money by writing. You’re writing to entertain, whether you’re writing a ghost story or mystery story or crime story – whatever you’re writing, you’re writing to entertain but all the time you’re creating characters and creating situations, and if you’re sincere with your creation you are searching in ways to understand yourself better.

LAB  Why was In My Father’s House (1978) your most difficult story to write? Were you satisfied with the ending, or were you simply exhausted, after seven years, of telling Phillip’s story of redemption, assuming, in fact, that he did indeed redeem himself. Where were you trying to take Reverend Phillip Martin?

EJG  I write better in the first-person point of view, but I couldn’t tell this story in the first person because I couldn’t have Robert X tell his own story. I had to have someone else talk about Robert X. I had to have someone else talk about Phillip Martin. So I had to tell the story either by third person or totally from the omniscient point of view. I tried several points of view to tell the story, but none of them were successful. I finally ended up with the omniscient. I feel that it is not up-to-par with my other works, because I have some difficulty with the omniscient point of view. But that was not the only problem. The problem was how to have Phillip Martin redeem himself or what would Robert X end up doing, going back or making an attempt to kill his father or [figuring out] exactly what was going to happen, and I had all kinds of problems with that book. It was a
book that I had to get right, after I’d finished *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). I wanted to go further, but it seemed like this book kept getting in the way. As I’ve said in interviews, as I may have said in the story, the father and son were separated during the time of slavery and still, up to this date, they have not really reconnected, and there’s that difficulty there, and I was trying to resolve that. In the conflict between Phillip Martin and Robert X, there’s a conflict that I’m not satisfied that I resolved. I don’t know if it’s possible to resolve or to be resolved. So it was a problem. I was never absolutely satisfied at all with what I did with the book, whether I’m working with the omniscient point of view or with the plot of the story. I wasn’t very satisfied. After seven years, I just thought, well I’d done as well as I could possibly ever do with this. I’d tried rewriting it from so many different points of view. I tried writing it from Chippo Simon’s point of view. I tried writing it from multiple points of view, but nothing was coming for me. So I just said, ok, I’m going with the omniscient point of view, and I’ll go as far as I can with that and then, after seven years of it, I just said that I’d had enough of it.

**LAB**  I know that you were influenced by Faulkner. Can you speak to the ways in which you were influenced? Why were you attracted to his work?

**EJG**  I don’t know that I’ve been much more influenced by Faulkner any more than, say, a writer like Hemingway or Ivan Turgenev. Well, I should take that back. Faulkner has an edge over these writers, but it was not totally Faulkner’s influence over me for my style of writing. Of course, we write about the South, the Mississippi borders, Louisiana, some of the same kind of characters you’d find in Faulkner’s small towns, hanging around the storefronts, working in the fields. You’d find the same sort of characters in Louisiana. Faulkner made me concentrate more on my characters. He showed me how similar they were, white or black characters in a field. I definitely don’t go along with Faulkner’s philosophy: his description of the characters, yes. He’s a master at capturing that southern dialogue, whether it’s white or black. But it was a certain level of dialogue that Faulkner was interested in. He could get the most illiterate of black
dialogue, but he was never interested in writing middle class black or upper class black dialogue or middle or upper class characters. When it came down to writing about peasant life, life in the fields, or life in a small town among the very poor people, yes, Faulkner had that kind of influence over me. He showed me how to describe the country stores, how people sat around on the porches. I knew that, but I didn’t know how to do it on paper until I saw what he had done. Another thing he did was show me how to concentrate in a single area. Well, he’d already gotten that from people like [James] Joyce. So it’s [the influence that’s] come down through the years from Joyce to Faulkner to others to myself, this concentrating on one general area. I definitely learned that from Faulkner as well as from Joyce. So these are some of the things that influenced me. When it came to philosophy and when it came to my characters reacting, it was my judgment about as to how my characters would react, not Faulkner’s, because I don’t know that Faulkner could have created a Marcus in Of Love and Dust (1967) and a Louise. I don’t know that he could have created Miss Jane Pittman. He could have created a Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury (1929) but not a Miss Jane Pittman. Miss Jane, he would not have created her, because he never would have walked her by that white man at the very end of the story. So there are certain things, as I’ve told others, that Faulkner told Dilsey’s story from his kitchen, Miss Jane Pittman told her story from her own kitchen, and they were two different stories, two different interpretations, told in two different ways. There were a lot of similarities, but when you get down to the nitty-gritty, there were some differences there. I remember talking to someone who told me about the interviewing of the ex-slaves for the WPA [Works Progress Administration] back in the early 30s, when writers needed work, and a white writer could go up to an old person who’d been enslaved and ask questions, and that person would give a certain kind of answer. When a black person would go to an ex-slave, someone with whom they could understand and communicate, they’d give a different kind of answer. It was a subtle kind of thing that Miss Jane was different from Dilsey. Faulkner gets Dilsey’s story. I get Miss Jane’s story. Faulkner gets Dilsey’s story.
in his kitchen. I get Miss Jane’s story in her kitchen. Dilsey would probably have told me a different story, but I did not create Dilsey. Faulkner created Dilsey. I created Miss Jane Pittman.

LAB I consider you a national treasure, and my next question is related to my view of you as a national treasure. Many of today’s writers of color, male and female, don’t write the kinds of narratives that speak to the culture of community, the importance of the land, and the integrity of its people. That’s why your work is so important. Can you talk about your affection for the land, this region, and growing up here on the plantation?

EJG I’ve always had a love for this place. I left here when I was fifteen years old. I had to go because I couldn’t attend high school here, I could not go to a library here, and I didn’t have any people in a nearby town with whom I could live and go to school. So my folks brought me to California when I was fifteen, but I left an aunt here who had raised me and I also left other family members here, so I left a part of me here. I’ve told others that the body went to California, but the soul remained here in Louisiana. I left but I didn’t leave. Something kept holding me back, holding me back here. I could not write about anything except Louisiana even though I spent most of my time in California. I could not write about anything except the land, the bayous, the rivers, the swamps. I had no interest in anything else. I could only write about the things that my people had experienced, my ancestors had experienced. See, we’ve lived on this particular plantation here for five generations, and I met some people when I was doing research for A Gathering of Old Men [1983] who knew my grandparents’ grandparents on this same place. So something about it just kept me here. Although I studied creative writing at San Francisco [State College] and at Stanford, and I knew the bohemian life in San Francisco, I’d been in the army, so I knew the army life. When it came down to writing I tried to write stories about those places, but nothing was successful. The only success was here and I knew that the reason why, the only thing that I could write about, truly and deeply, and put all my soul into was this subject here, and I knew that it was because I still felt connected to everything
here. When I started teaching at UL [University of Louisiana at Lafayette] in 1981, I was near this place, and I was always coming back, always coming back here and talking to the old people, and when my wife and I had a chance to buy a part of this plantation, of course we jumped at the chance and built a house here. Because I feel that I am still close to the people, my ancestors; they’re buried about three-quarters of a mile in the cemetery back here. Now, this is False River here, the fields of False River. I picked cotton right here, on this place, where we’re sitting, right here. My mother and father chopped sugar cane here, and my uncles all pulled corn around this area. This is farmland, nothing but farmland. When we [Dianne Gaines, his wife] bought the place, it was a field. The church school of Grant’s, in A Lesson Before Dying [1993], is modeled after my church school. It was my church school, y’ know, six years in it. We moved the church onto this property before we built the house, during the same time. We started building on the house when we moved the church over here. It was in the quarters. Now, I lived about three-hundred yards from where we are now. The big house, where my grandmother worked for so many years, is just up the road here about two hundred yards, so this is where we lived, right here. Maybe Dianne can take you back there to the church and you can see some of the pictures back there on the wall. But anyway, we moved the church. The church was falling apart and we asked permission, from the people who owned it on the other side of the plantation, if we could have the church and they said yes, and so we moved it over here and renovated it. So all of that keeps me connected to the place and to the people and to my past. When we get together, my friends now, we talk about the times when we lived here. There were many hard days, many mean days. You know, that’s why we had about five months of school, y’ know, because we couldn’t go to school when we were needed in the field. In the spring you picked a bi-ration of potatoes and pulled onions and whatever else, and in the fall and winter you had to go into the cotton field. We were about seven or eight years old; we were very small children. So those were some terrible, terrible times for us. There was racism and, of course, everything was segregated at that time. There’s
still racism, but everything was segregated at that time. I couldn’t go to a place and have a decent drink of water or a sandwich or anything like that. At the same time it seemed like the black people were much closer together. They were constantly helping each other, constantly helping each other because they knew you couldn’t get help out there, so they would help you on the place. So all of that kind of stuff kept me intact with the place, not with the state of Louisiana, but with this general area, because that’s where my folks had come from. I saw some many miserable days. My people suffered. Let me put it this way: I am what I am today because of them, and I cannot ever forget that. They suffered but they endured, and I survived. From their endurance, I survived. That’s why I can write it in books today as I did for them, the older people, writing letters for them when I was a teenager, well, before I was a teenager, ten or twelve years old. Because of those letters, I suppose, that’s why I can write books. So there’s that contact, that connection. I’ve never tried to disconnect myself from my folks or this general area. I’m not saying the South. I’m not saying all of Louisiana. I’m saying this general area here. This place. And this kind of thing I learned from Faulkner. Write truly enough about a single place. But you cannot, of course, truly tell all the stories. I’ve been asked quite often whether or not I’ll write a novel about California or San Francisco, and my answer has always been: Whenever I get all of the “Louisiana stuff” out of me, and I hope that never, ever happens, that thing that drives me.

LAB Near the end of A Lesson Before Dying, in “Jefferson’s Diary,” you make an immediate shift from standard, conventional English to a phonetic rendering. To me, that transition is the most powerful part of the book. Can you discuss the significance of this epistolary inclusion in the novel and the importance of Jefferson’s voice?

EJG Well, before the chapter we don’t know too much about him. We are getting some information through Grant, but we don’t know enough about him and I didn’t want him trying to explain himself just before he was going to be executed, no final words. I didn’t want that sort of stuff. So what I thought, what you give, is
an entire chapter devoted to his thinking. The question was how do you do that? I
said, well, just let him tell it; let him tell the story. Let him tell it, and let him tell
it in his own way, and so that’s why the notebook comes into the story. I needed
him to talk. I wanted him to do it in the only way that was possible for him to do
it. Jefferson has limited education and a limited vocabulary. Everything about him
was limited. At one time I thought, well, this was after I’d written the diary, I
thought maybe I should have written it in a different handwriting, perhaps in a
cursive handwriting. We hear about how everyone feels about Jefferson. We hear
how Aunt Emma feels, we hear how Tante Lou feels, we hear how the sheriff
feels, we hear how Grant feels, and we even hear how the children feel. But we
never hear how Jefferson feels. We never hear Jefferson’s voice. It [“Jefferson’s
Diary”] is the uplift of everything. Someone has said that “Jefferson’s Diary” is
such a sad story. I said, “No! Once you read ‘Jefferson’s Diary,’ it’s uplifted your
heart, if you had a heart.” He’s uplifted you, and he tells you how he feels. That is
the turning point, that little “light” that [James] Joyce speaks of, that epiphany.
That brings light to the entire story. You know, I’ve been asked if it was difficult
to write that particular chapter, and I’ve said, “No. Once I decided how I was
going to do it, it wasn’t difficult at all to write it, to use the language that he
would use, to write with no punctuation or capitalization.” It wasn’t difficult
because he probably would not have known how to do that. By the time I came to
writing this chapter, I’d been with him for about five years, because it took me
over a period of seven years to write the book, but I was only writing half that
time a year. The rest of the time I was not writing. I was teaching over at UL, and
when I was not teaching over at UL at Lafayette, I was in San Francisco writing
the book. So I knew his language, because I’d been around him for about five
years in that jail cell, and if you live around someone in a jail cell for about five
years you’ll learn something about him. So it was no problem writing it. I was
concerned, though, when I’d finished writing it, when I sent it to New York. I
asked my editor, Ash Green, if he had a problem reading it, and he said, “No.” I
said, “Thank God,” because I was worried that the way it was written, that people
would say that they couldn’t understand it, that they would say that they couldn’t understand this dialect, that they didn’t care for dialect, but that [“Jefferson’s Diary”] was the great uplift of the book. One critic said that the rest of the book is ‘typical Gaines,’ but this particular chapter is vintage. From this chapter onward, it just goes over and over and over. Well, after that chapter, that’s when the preparation for the execution takes place. But that chapter should uplift you to the rest of that book. Jefferson’s writing reveals so much about him. Many people have said how they wept and wept and wept. Yes, well, I’ve wept there, too, at the play. I’ve seen the play about a dozen times in different parts of the country. It’s very powerful at the very end.

LAB I’ve read that the one literary work you wish some enterprising writer would tackle is the United States’ equivalent of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1865-1869). Could you discuss why this particular work bears significance to you as a writer?

EJG I’d certainly like to see someone write a work with the title *Decade*, and it would begin with 1958 and go through 1968. More things happened with more people of all different social levels, educational levels, all levels during those ten years than have ever happened in this country before. From the lowest peasant in the fields of Mississippi and Georgia to Alabama to Louisiana to the White House to the Supreme Court to governors’ mansions to ministers’ churches. All those people were involved. Not everybody, but people from every social group, political groups, and government offices were in some ways involved. Much of our history has not been told; our problems have been told as if we have no history. If we could create a novel that will be representative of what the United States is about, as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and what *Anna Karenina* [1878] represented to what Russia was about, it will be the first time that anyone has ever taken that challenge. It will be greater than *Invisible Man* [1952] or Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* [1939]. It could cover so much; it’d be a large book. I’ve said that I can’t do it, I’m too old for that but I’d like to see a young person who really, really has talent and is really, really interested in doing it, and I wouldn’t mind being
involved. But they’d have to do the work, and they’d have to do a lot of work, I mean, a lot of work. Everything is so easy today. When you get on the computer, you can get all of the information, whereas thirty or forty years ago you had to go out and talk to people and walk the streets. But today you can get on the Internet and send an e-mail here and an e-mail there, and get all that information. I don’t know if that’s good or bad, because you need contact. You can get information, but you need that human contact.

LAB Is it safe to say that from your humble beginnings as the unofficial scribe on the False River Plantation your career as a writer began? How did the people on the plantation come to know you as the go-to person to write their letters? Can you talk about how you came to claim this coveted position on the plantation?

EJG My aunt raised me. She was crippled, she never did walk, she crawled across the floor all her life, and because she couldn’t visit others, the people use to visit our house and they’d sit there and talk and talk and talk all the time. None of these people had ever gone to any school. No education at all. It was my aunt who told me that I should write their letters for them and read their letters for them when they received mail, which I did. They would come over there, and I’d sit on the floor by their chair. Sometime, if it was a man that I was writing a letter for, he’d sit on the floor or on the porch, or I’d be sitting on the steps, and I’d have my little yellow pencil and write on a tablet this wide [three by five inches], and I’d write their letters. And I’ve said many, many times that they would know how to begin the letter, but they wouldn’t know how to proceed. They’d say, for instance, ‘Hey, Sarah, how are you? I am well. I’m hoping you are the same.’ And you’d sit there minutes after minutes after minutes, and they don’t know what to talk about. And they’d say, ‘Say something about the garden,’ or ‘Say something about the field.’ So, I’d just say, ‘Ok.’ So you just try and put it down, and then you read it back, and then, well, they’d say, ‘Uh-uh, that ain’ right.’ So I had those little pencils with those little pink erasers on top, and then you’d put it down again. But they
would always call on me. They wouldn’t call on my brother. I was the chosen one to do those kinds of things. Well, I’m the eldest of my siblings, and of course, I had to take care of my aunt who could not walk. So I started writing like that.

**LAB** Long before the published stories, you were the writer then.

**EJG** I realize now that I was writing then, but I didn’t know that at the time. I was just doing what I was supposed to do. I was just putting these things down for these people. I was asked recently what is the easiest way for me to write my stories, and I said, “I write from the “I” point-of-view,” and I said, “You know, I think I’m still writing those letters for those people.” There’s an “I” there. I’m still trying to write the letters for the old people. I think so. I think so. Because I can’t think of anything else to write about, sometimes I go back there in that cemetery and just sit there and look at some of the graves and those tombs, and I think, “If it were not for them, I wouldn’t be the writer I am.” Well, I know I would not be a writer. They’re the ones who started me off when I was very young.

**LAB** With respect to the name “Jefferson” in *A Lesson Before Dying*, did your Aunt Augustine Jefferson’s inability to walk during her lifetime serve as a model in terms of Jefferson’s eventual stand as a man?

**EJG** I don’t think so. I never thought of it that way. The name just came up when I was writing the book. It could possibly be subconscious, but I’ve used presidents’ names before. Someone once asked me why I used all of these presidents’ names. In *Catherine Carmier* [1964] I used the name Jackson, and of course there’s Grant in *A Lesson Before Dying* as well. Now, Jefferson’s name, well, I can’t disagree with what you’re saying. It’s just that I was not conscious about the meaning of Jefferson’s name when I was writing the book.

**LAB** How important do you think your work is in terms of its place in southern literature?

**EJG** Well, that’s entirely up to people like you. I don’t know how important my work is. I try to write as well as I possible can. I have received many awards from southern universities. I’ve won the Louisiana Literary Award twice for The
Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman and for A Lesson Before Dying. I’ve won the Library Association Award and the Southern Regional Award. I’m a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers. I’ve won the Gold Medal Award of California twice. I was given the National Humanities Award by President Bill Clinton. I was given the [Paris] Chevalier of the Order Arts and Letters Award by the governor of France. I’ve been named a MacArthur Foundation Fellow. As a matter of fact, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman has just been chosen to be read by all French-speaking students in France who are going to be teachers. A Lesson Before Dying has been adopted in about twenty different cities across the nation, and we’ve been in cities all over the country beginning with Seattle and all over the South, in New York as well as in Florida. So, I don’t know what place my work will have in the canon of southern literature. When I was in California, they used to say that I was a “California writer” writing about the South. When I was in Louisiana, they’d say I was a Louisiana writer; other people say I’m a southern writer. Some would say I’m a black writer. They stick you in those pigeon holes. It doesn’t matter to me. As I’ve said, I just write as well as I can. I’ve got about eight books out there [in bookstores]. About eight books in that cabinet over there have been written about me. There are another six or eight books out there, and there are people who are writing their dissertations about my work.

LAB Yes. The last time I checked there were about nine or ten dissertations. I saw a number of books in the water-front house about your work, including David Estes’ Critical Reflections on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines [1994], Mary Ellen Doyle’s Voices From the Quarters [2002], and John Lowe’s Conversations with Ernest Gaines [1995].

EJG Where I fit into the rest of the writing of the south, I don’t know. I know I get as much education from southern universities as I get from any other section of the country. Let someone else decide where I fit in.

LAB In terms of your lack of an active, physical presence in the civil rights protests in California during the 1960s, you were criticized for not being
more visible and for not being a “protest writer.” I believe that your work
speaks to the same issues that the more vocal members of the community
were visibly protesting: racism, poverty, class, and gender issues. How did
you handle the criticism, and did you ever attempt to write a novel, aside
from The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, that spoke directly to the
issues I’ve mentioned?

EJG I could not write the novels of Baldwin or Richard Wright, although I came from
the South. When I left the South, I didn’t go to that mean world that [Richard]
Wright ended up in. I went to a small town in Vallejo, California. I went to an
integrated neighborhood. My junior high school, high school, and junior college
were all totally integrated. As I said earlier, I left a place I loved very much. I
have protest in my stories. If you look at the very first story that I published
internationally, “The Sky is Gray,” where those people have to walk up and down
the cold street in the town, if that is not protest, I don’t what protest is. Those
people are cold, those people are hungry. This child is in pain, the mother is in
pain. Isn’t that protest? Isn’t that protest? What am I supposed to do? Get thrown
out of a restaurant or start a demonstration in front of the courthouse or something
like that? The struggle was showing the only way I knew how to work to better
my conditions. From “The Sky is Gray” to In My Father’s House.

LAB Your thematic treatment of father and son separations govern many of your
short stories, from “The Sky is Gray,” to the title story in Bloodline [1968] to
your signature novel of father and son separation, In My Father’s House.

Why is so much of your work devoted to the theme of absent fathers?

EJG Fathers and sons were brought here in chains and then separated on the auction
block in slave-holding places. I don’t think that they’ve made a connection since.
Too often our fathers cannot help the sons. African American fathers do not send
us to war. They’re very seldom our judges when we’re standing at trial. They’re
not often our doctors. They don’t represent us when we’re in the courtroom. We
often blame him without realizing that he’s never been given that opportunity to
defend us. We’ve fought in every war that this country has ever had, beginning
with the War of Independence, and yet, when it comes to defending our families, our children, our wives, some way or another the white man makes all of those decisions, and that separates father and son. You know, “I can’t depend on my father to save me. And I need you to save me.”

LAB Let’s talk about the writer’s art. How does background shape the writer’s art?

EJG You don’t write in a void. I need and must have “place” to write about. I can’t write about a place I don’t know anything about. I can’t write about northern Louisiana. I don’t care about northern Louisiana. I can’t write about New Orleans, although I’ve written an essay for National Geographic, which will be published in August [2006]. But I’ve not written anything fictitious about New Orleans, because I don’t know New Orleans that well. So my background is that I need to know the indigenous things, the fields, the water, the trees, the vegetation, the people, the clothes they wear, what they eat, songs they sing, that sort of thing. For the infinity of the story you need that kind of background. Well, I do. I can’t write about any other place. I can’t write about Texas or New York or Hollywood. I need that background. There’s so much involved in it until it becomes part of me.

LAB What is it that younger writers can learn from mature writers in terms of structure, character development, style, and technique?

EJG They can learn all that you have just mentioned! [Laughter]. It’s something that I learned [while] reading the great classic writers. By reading, say, the Faulknners, by reading the Hemingways, reading the Tolstoys, reading the Chekovs, reading Turgenev, reading Joyce. You know, reading those writers. You learn those things, because much of that you think you might know [about] how to do this work, you soon find out. Writing is much harder than just reading. When you read something, and it comes out very easy you can bet that the writer has spent hours, a long time getting that stuff together to get that sentence right.

LAB That’s what you did with the opening line in A Lesson Before Dying: “I was not there, yet I was there.”
EJG Yes. “I was not there, yet I was there.” Then I’d go over and over and over it. But, you see, Grant gets that from Tante Lou and from Miss Emma. How they sat and where they sat. And then, of course, eventually, he would get something from Paul. And then he gets all of that stuff together to give to you. But that’s after they’re cheating, because people don’t tell you everything. They give you so much fact. Just like at the very end of the book, the different people who tell the story. For example, the woman sweeping the street who sees the truck go by, the truck with the electric chair. Now, she tells that to someone else, and Grant is telling the story. See, I never shift points of view. Everyone says, “Well, all of a sudden you become omniscient at the very end.” I never become omniscient. The person telling the story is someone else, and Grant is telling you. The same thing with Cully Lemon when he goes to the bank to get this change. Cully has come back into the quarters and told other people what happened, and Grant tells the story. Well, we know what the sheriff had for breakfast that morning. Why? Because the servant there comes back and tells other people, and Grant can tell the story. And that’s really cheating! I need to put somebody there! I put my spy in! I put my spy there! I put my spies there! So that I can reveal to you. So Grant says, “I was not there, yet I was there.” Because I saw that stuff! I was right there!

LAB It’s such a great opening line. When I teach that novel, as well as any short story (for example, Morrison’s “The Coming of Maureen Peal” or Toni Cade Bambara’s “My Man Bovanne”), I tell my students to pay attention to the opening passage and then of course attention must be paid to the closing passage as well, and to merge all of the middle for a kind of thematic configuration. I ask them to define the power of, “I was not there, yet I was there.” I tell them that those few words set the stage for who is going to see what, how, how it’s going to be relayed and when.

EJG Yes, you’re right. A lot of times he wanted to avoid things, yet he was there. He wanted to avoid the entire South, yet “I’m here.” ‘I don’t want to be here, but “I’m here.” I don’t want to teach you little children anything, but I’m teaching you. “I’m here.” “I was not there, I was not there,” yet “I was there,” until the
very end. When he looks back at those kids crying, “This is where I belong. This is where I belong.”

**LAB** There’s a rather touching scene in the novel where this young boy is standing in the classroom flipping the globe around, and the classroom is empty with the exception of Grant, and he asks Grant, “Where is Yugoslavia?” He mispronounces Yugoslavia, saying “Yugo-slay-via.” After Grant corrects him, he in turn says, “One day, Mr. Wiggins, one day.” What he means is that one day he’s going to get out of there and go “far, far away.” He wants to move away from the plantation and the multitude of chores he has to do everyday. He simply wants to get out and experience another kind of life. He seems to remind Grant of himself and his own youthful desire to move forward. That’s a really great scene, also.

**EJG** Yes. I was one of the lucky ones. As a matter of fact, I have to give a talk at the Louisiana Rural Museum on June 5th [2006], and one of the things that I’m going to bring up in my talk is that I was one of the lucky ones to get away, because so many of the other kids never did and they died right here; they died young. Many went to the prison, to Angola [State Prison in Louisiana]. Many of them died violently fighting among themselves. Many died of heart attacks and strokes, around forty years old, men that I grew up around. I was one of the lucky ones. My folks took me away and educated me. I was fortunate to come back and give something.

**LAB** I know that you left [the plantation] to join your mother and stepfather [in California] when you were fifteen years old, and it was during that time that you visited a public library for the first time. They lived in a housing project and there was such a diverse community there.

**EJG** Yes, yes. They were working for the government at the time. There were Filipinos, there were Chinese. There was a Native American guy that I knew. There were rural whites and blacks in the general area, and we all had to go to the same school.
LAB Why was it important for *A Gathering of Old Men* [1983] to be told from multiple perspectives? Were the stories of the men in the novel partially based on the lives of men from the False River plantation?

EJG Well, they’re not based entirely on any group. All men would like to stand in the sun one day. They need those fifteen minutes of recognition, as someone once said. All men do. I told it from multiple points of view because I tried the first-person point of view and it didn’t work. I was trying to tell it from Lou Dimes’ point of view, but Lou Dimes couldn’t tell me the way Snookum thought, and Lou Dimes couldn’t tell me the way Snookum would run. Lou Dimes couldn’t tell me the way Janie talked herself into that house. Lou Dimes couldn’t tell me what these old black men thought when they fished along the False River here. He couldn’t tell me those kinds of things, and I didn’t want to go to the omniscient point of view. I wanted to catch the language. I wanted to catch the different voices of the different people. I wanted to hear Snookum’s voice, the little boy. I wanted to hear the way he says, “I’m running, I’m running, I’m running, I’m patting my butt,” like the way you pat a horse when he’s running. I wanted that kind of voice. I wanted Janie’s voice, that religious voice. I needed that voice. I wanted the voice of Miss Murrell, the frustrated white woman. I wanted her voice. I wanted the casual voice of Dirty Red, the way he would talk. I wanted the minister’s voice. I wanted his voice in there. I just wanted to hear voices and voices and voices to tell me that story. I didn’t think I could tell it from the omniscient point of view, because I get involved with too many different characters, and I just couldn’t say, well, this is about Dirty Red, or this is about Chimney. Just let Chimney and Dirty Red and all the others tell me the stories themselves, and they could just sort of give me a chapter at a time. Sort of like Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying*. So this is why I had to tell it from multiple points of view, because one person just couldn’t tell it, and I didn’t want to tell it from the omniscient point of view. I wanted the voices. Since it was a gathering of old men, I wanted all of their voices, all of their input.
LAB The women in your novels, as well as your short stories, are presented as strong, independent and, in many cases, domineering figures. How reflective are these fictional constructs to the real-life women who were in your life in Point Coupeé?

EJG My aunt, who could not walk, raised us. She cooked for us. We had to bring everything to her. We had a little wood-burning stove for food, for meat or vegetables or whatever it was that she was cooking that day, and we had to sit it right before her. She sat on a little bench by the stove, and another little bench in front of her, she used as a table. She’d cut up the vegetables and the meat, and then she could put it over in the pot on the stove. She washed our clothes; we had to bring everything to her. We had an old washtub at that time. We brought the water, the old washboard, the soap, and everything, and she sat on the little bench there by the stove, and she would brace herself against the rim of the tub and wash the clothes on the board. Then she would rinse the clothes, and the children would go out and hang the clothes on the line. She disciplined us. We had to bring our own switch and get down on our knees before her and take our punishment that way.

LAB I’m sure she said, or, of course, you automatically knew that you shouldn’t bring back the tiniest thing [a small switch]. You knew to bring back something of substance, didn’t you?

EJG Oh, yes! [Laughter]. If you were subject to bring a tiny one back she’d send you back to get another one. I had a brother who would bring back the tiniest one, and she’d say, “Go back, go back, go back.” And he’d go back two or three times to get the right size. She used to work in her garden, a little garden beside the house, and she would crawl over the floor and down the steps, across the yard right to the vegetable garden. Then she’d work in her little vegetable garden. There she’d work. She had this little hoe, and she’d work among her vegetables, her cucumbers, or tomatoes, or beans, or peas, or okra, or whatever we had in the garden at that time of the year. She would work among that. She had to put her hand to the earth. She needed to put her hand to the earth. During pecan season
she’d crawl over the back yard with a little sack, dragging a little flour sack or a little rice sack, and she’d find pecans under the tree and bring them back inside and crack pecans and make pecan pralines. With all those obstacles, she was the strongest person I’ve ever known in my life, and I think, most of the women in my books are, somewhat, part of my aunt. No one was based on her, but several people have said that Miss Jane Pittman is the story of my aunt, but Miss Jane Pittman is not. Miss Jane Pittman tried to do all kinds of crazy things, but my aunt could never do those crazy things because she was crippled. So Miss Jane is not my aunt. But Miss Jane has a lot of the fortitude and strength of my aunt, letting nothing in the world get into the way of her continuing her life. When it was cold in the winter, I would, because I was the eldest of my siblings, get out and start a fire in the fireplace to warm the floor by the time she’d get out of bed, because her bed was right by the fireplace. I’d have the floor warm by the time she got out of bed to crawl over the floor to the kitchen. I was raised by my aunt the first fifteen and one-half years of my life. She was religious, although she couldn’t go to church. She would sing a little song and the minister would come by and talk to her, and the deacons would come by and talk to her. The women in my novels, I suppose, are based somewhat around her, not entirely, though. But her strength, I gave to them. And I’ve known other strong black women. My mother was quite strong, I think, as was my grandmother. On that plantation there were very strong people.

LAB Speaking of strong women, Madam Toussaint, in “A Long Day in November,” advises Sonny to burn up his car if he wants to regain his wife, and when he heeds her advice the wife then wants him to physically abuse her so that in the eyes of the community he won’t be seen as weak and less than a man for having burned up the car. The car-burning scene posits the theory of community as the site for social change as well as it embraces the theme of manhood that we see so often in your work. Sonny needs this notion of patriarchal validation from the community. Can you talk about the thematic juxtaposition of these two scenes?
The wife wants him to beat her because it will “prove” to the community that her husband is a man. See, that theme of manhood comes up again. But the wife demands it. Sonny did not want to do anything like that. The wife wants him to do that. She tells him, “You’ve got to do that, because I don’t want anybody laughing at my husband in the street for burning up his car. So you’ve got to do that. You’ve got to punish me.” But he says, “I don’t want to do that.” The wife believes that Sonny needs the community to see that he is a man, and the physical scars will indeed prove to everyone that he is a man. At the end of the story, Sonny’s mother-in-law proclaims him a man “after all.” A few other short stories end with the proclamation of the male as “a man.” I also use that voodoo woman in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* when she goes there to talk about “keep off that horse.” I have her there, but she has more problems talking about herself. Her feet are bothering her, this little woman. She has all sorts of things wrong. I’ve had stories all of my life, you know, people talked about these things.

When I was writing *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* there was an old woman who lived next door to some people I knew in Baton Rouge, and she was supposed to be one of these women. So I said that I needed to go over there and talk with her. I’d never talked to these people. I’d never been around these kinds of people, and I just wanted to talk to her. But I was afraid to go over there alone, so I took this little girl over there with me. She’d call me “Oiny.” She said, “I’ll go over there with you, Oiny.” So I went over there, and the old lady had all these colored bottles turned upside-down on the walkway leading up her house.

Yes. The lighted bottles. They were the equivalent of the solar lights that we have now that line our driveways and walkways. Of course, during that time we had our own way of making things work for us, of beautifying our personal spaces.

Yes! She had all that. When I got inside her house she had postcards and Christmas cards that decorated the entire place. She must have been saving those things for over fifty years! She had them stuck all over the place. And I just sat
around and talked to her, not wanting information about anything like that from her. And we just talked. We just had a general conversation. She was the first “one” I’d ever visited.

LAB You were kind of skeptical when you walked away, though. Right?

EJG Yeah. Those kind of people could do things to you! [Laughter].

LAB Just like the talking chicken in “My Grandpa and the Haint”: “What you know there, EJ?” I use to hear my maternal grandmother talk about things like the neighborhood woman “who could do things to you.” There were always stories about women and the “power” they had to make things happen and to make people do certain things. I told my grandmother that I didn’t believe any of that, but she insisted that such a woman existed who had “the power.” My grandmother would tell me stories about people who had suffered the powers of the voodoo person. The stories were real-life ghost stories. Now, the title of your latest publication, *Mozart and Leadbelly* [2005], appears to be a dichotomy. Could you explain this reference and its significance in relationship to the work’s essays and stories?

EJG Mozart and Leadbelly are not considered dichotomies. A friend of mine once told me a story about a young African American who would get on an elevator in Washington, DC, always whistling a tune of Mozart. The elevator would be crowded with white people, and he had to let them to know that he was “classical.” I said that he could have whistled a tune of Leadbelly’s or Bessie Smith’s. I said that I loved Mozart. I have a pile of Mozart LPs. I listen to Mozart all the time, and I listen to Beethoven and Bach. When I’m writing, Mozart, quiet in the background, is very soothing. When I’m not writing, or when I’m just sitting around, or when I’m driving my car and playing blues in my car, all the time playing blues, I said that Mozart, although he soothes my mind and his music soothes my brain, he cannot tell me what Leadbelly can tell me about Angola State Prison in Louisiana. He cannot tell me what Lightnin’ Hopkins can tell me about farming or working in a bar. He cannot tell me as Bessie Smith can tell me about the flood waters in 1927. Now, when I’m writing, I go to the people and talk to
the people, and that would be the Leadbelly, my source of getting my material, my source of research, my Leadbelly, my going to the fields. I always associate the Leadbelly, the Lightnin’ Hopkins, the Bessie Smith with the field. I associate Mozart with the formal, western way of writing music. Now, I go to both. I use the library at LSU and the archives. I will tell people that I must have both. I must have both in order to get my work together, to get to the sources I require for my work. I will need both Leadbelly and I need the formal of Mozart. I learned a lot about my writing by reading the great classics of the white writers. I learned much about their writings. But I would not have been able to write my books had I had experienced or learned from the old people here. I draw from both. I draw from the old people. I draw from this land. I draw from my own personal experience, but I need this technical thing from the other side, how to put this thing down on paper, and this is where Mozart and Leadbelly come in. They are not contradicting one another. I’m not doing that. It’s that I need both of them to help me get my work together. Music has always played a part in my writing, because I’ve always written with classical music, whether it’s Mozart or Haydn or anyone else, quiet in the background. I’ve always had that, because it frees my mind from other things and lets me concentrate on my work. At the same time, I’ve learned so much from others. I learned from Bessie Smith what that great flood of ’27 was about. I’ve read Faulkner’s Old Man [1927], but Bessie does a great job, and most African American blues singers have talked about that great flood of ’27.

LAB Would you talk briefly about the flood of 1927?

EJG The flood was all over, the entire South at that time, when a levee breached just as it had with [Hurricane] Katrina, the disaster of Katrina. It didn’t flood out in New Orleans or anything like that, but the waters covered rural Louisiana, and, I suppose, in Mississippi as well. There’s a great book [by John M. Barry] called Rising Tide [1997] that addresses the disaster in great detail. I just draw from those different sources, the rural sources, the fields, and I draw from the formal: the library, the archives, and western literature. When I really have to get down to
my soul, my part of the world, and get down to my people and their soul, I must come over here to Bessie and Lightnin’ Hopkins and the great jazz singers and great jazz musicians and all of it. I play them all the time. I have a collection of over 1,200 works of various artists in the archives.

LAB In A Lesson Before Dying what was your purpose in presenting Grant Wiggins as a reluctant son of the South? Is the weight of his suffering due to his inability to free himself from the burdens of his past, or does he see himself as a survivor of his past?

EJG I wanted to show both sides of a man conflicted within himself. Grant sees himself in each of the descriptions. He suffers because he is, as you mention, unable to free himself from the burdens of his past, but he also sees himself as a survivor. He is drawn back to the plantation because he feels a kinship with the people there, but at the same times he feels a kind of distance from them. There’s that “push and pull,” a tug-of-war he has within himself that brings him there but on the same hand works against him just as strongly.

LAB Can you discuss the scenario behind the Dial Press publication of Catherine Carmier in 1964 and the publication of Bloodline? Why were the Bloodline stories important to you in terms of the narratives of the male characters?

EJG I’d written Catherine Carmier already, and then I wrote the stories. But we’d gone to a different publishing house. We’d left Atheneum [Publishing Company] for Catherine Carmier, and my agent had taken me to Dial Press. I had the stories out there, and I wanted to get them published. My editor at the time said that we needed a novel in before we could publish the stories. But I said, ‘These stories are going to make my name.’ He told me that we needed something else. He said, ‘You don’t have a name now; we need a novel. Make your name before the stories; stories don’t make young writers’ names.’ So I tried to think of a novel, and the only one that I could think of was the novel based around the “Three Men.” This guy had come out of prison. What kind of person would he be? So it developed into the novel, Of Love and Dust [1967].
LAB Speaking of *Of Love and Dust*, can you talk about the main character, Marcus, and how he earns this bad-boy reputation? I know that he is modeled after the former boxer Muhammad Ali and a man that you knew by the name of Lionel.

EJG Well, Marcus is based on Muhammad Ali’s mouth. Lionel would go in a bar and say, “I can lick any man in the bar.” And I used to run around with him in San Francisco. And I used to say to him, “Lionel, man, you need to cut it down. You’re going to get yourself hurt.”

LAB Is Lionel the man who wanted to get a part in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* when filming began, and a couple days later he was killed?

EJG Yes, right. He was killed. He knew I was coming down here to Louisiana from San Francisco, and he wanted to come down with me. He said, “I wanna get on that show.” And I said, “Well, come on down; maybe you’ll find something.”

LAB Now, he wanted to drive down in an old, beat-up car. He was a sort of “shade tree” mechanic.

EJG Yes. He said, “Man, let’s me and you drive down.” And I said to him, “Man, I’m not going anywhere in that doggone old car.” And he said, “Oh, that car can get to Louisiana.” I mean, he had three or four around the place, and I bet you I could put them all together, and they wouldn’t make one good car. [Laughter]. So, I said, “No, No, I’m flying down.” Two days later, a friend of mine came by to tell me that a woman had killed him. Point blank.

LAB He had no intention of doing right?

EJG He’d had a lot of problems. He’d had problems in Baton Rouge. He’d killed a guy in a knife fight. Two guys jumped him; he killed one of them, and he was sent to Angola. He spent about five years in Angola. Then, when he came out, he came back to Baton Rouge, but they told him to get out of town. So he went to Houston, stayed there a while. Some kind of way, word from Baton Rouge got to Houston, and he had to leave Houston, and a woman went with him and they left for San Francisco. But he was tough. He was tough at heart. I used to run with all these guys, and I told myself that I had to stop before I got myself killed.
Well, I guess it was a sort of easy thing to do, the running with this person and that person, way back when. It wasn’t, of course, that much going on.

Yes. I wanted to experience things going on, you know, going around with tough guys in places like that. Well, I wasn’t tough. We’d just be around it, wanting to go to bars and hang around the bars, and there’d be different kind of women around the bars and all that kind of stuff. Now, I had no money, but I’d go around there with Lionel and a couple other guys and hang in. But I was always afraid, and Lionel would say, “You’re just scared!” You’re darn right I was scared! [Laughter]. We’d walk into a bar, and he’d say he could whip anybody in the bar!

Yeah. Big mouth. Loud mouth. A go-for-bad kind of fellow.

But Marcus had Muhammad Ali’s gab for talking: ‘I know I’m pretty. I can stand back and no man can whip me.’ Between Lionel and Muhammad Ali stands Marcus.

In one of James Joyce’s short stories, “Eveline” [1914] the word dust is used, metaphorically, for the sedate life of the title character. I know that you studied Joyce in college. Can you discuss the symbolism of the word in relationship to your own work, in particular its use in Of Love and Dust?

Yes, yes. We had a little rain for the last couple of days, but if you were sitting out on a back porch and looking out there, you would have seen some dust. I mean [in the quarters], that dust would be flying all the way back. The people would be working in the fields, about two miles back there, and from the time the truck gets on the road to come in from the fields all the way in to the river, you’d find dust flying all over the place. We lived in the quarters over here, on the plantation quarters, and whenever anybody came down the road, it was dusty because there was no gravel or blacktop or anything like that, just the red, dusty road.

Those roads are sort of like the roads in Campbellton, Florida. My maternal grandmother’s sister died a couple of years ago. She was one-hundred-six years old. She lived in a tiny house, not quite as large as the church/school in the back of your residence here. The house was surrounded by expansive
fields, and houses were very far apart. The roads were dusty. As a matter of fact, the road in front of her home was blacktopped only three years ago. Campbellton is a very rural community, as much today as it was two or three decades ago; the county seat is sixteen miles away in Marianna. The area, however, is similar to what you’re describing here. My parents often recount their childhood adventures up and down the dusty roads of their respective communities.

EJG I was trying to play with this word in Of Love and Dust. I think at one time, I had Louise say something to Marcus that, “Life is love. The rest of everything else is dust.” I said, “Come on. Louise could never say something so intelligent as that.” But that was the meaning of it. The absence of love is dust, the absence of love is death, regardless of what kind of life it is. Love is life, and the absence of life is dust. Those were some [word] games that I was playing there. But I had Louise saying it one time, and I said I’d better cut that out, because if you can’t figure out what it means by love and dust, well, I’d hate to put those kinds of words in Louise’s mouth, because she’s not that bright. She was not bright at all.

LAB The are multiple stories in Of Love and Dust. Marcus has a story, Louise has a story, Aunt Margaret, the woman who raises Louise’s children, has a story, the sheriff has a story, and Jim, the narrator, has a story. Marcus comes to the plantation with baggage and his own story as well. Now, my question is: How do you manage to keep all of these stories separate but then tell the big story?

EJG You cheat! [Laughter]. I had Jim to be able to get along with everybody. Jim could get along with Aunt Margaret, and he also knew everyone. He’d been there for a while; he got to know Aunt Margaret, so Jim is the person who gives all that information to you. So how I connect all those stories is through Jim. Aunt Margaret would tell Jim certain things, Marcus would tell Jim certain things, and Jim would hear things, other things from other people. You know, this is how people tell stories. In A Lesson Before Dying Grant is not in nearly half of the
places he talks about. For example, the first sentence in the novel, *I was not there, yet I was there.* That is the opening sentence.

LAB  Now, the opening line in *A Lesson Before Dying* is such a profound line: “*I was not there, yet I was there.*” Tell me, did you have to ponder long and hard to come up with such a great opening line?

EJG  I don’t think that I had to think too hard on that. I knew that he was going to tell the story, but I knew that he didn’t want to be anywhere near it. He didn’t want to be involved in it, directly involved in it, but he was always involved. He doesn’t want to be there, but he’s there.

LAB  He was a reluctant son of the South. He was bitter about a lot of things, and he brought that bitterness back to the plantation with him. He brought it to Vivian; he brought it to Emma; he brought it to Tante Lou; he brought it to Rev. Ambrose. He really brought it to Jefferson. There was a push-and-pull dichotomy working there. A lot of people think that the story is about Jefferson, but I’d always thought, from my first reading of the novel, that it was about Grant and how Jefferson’s presence in his life affected and changed him. I never thought the story was about Jefferson. Of course, Jefferson is the catalyst that moves the story forward, but Grant is the character who is most affected by Jefferson. If you read the novel and see it as a condemned man’s final days and you focus on that aspect of the story, you see it as another story about a man falsely accused of a crime who suffers the ultimate fate for that crime. When the novel was published, I read the reviews of many critics, and many seemed to focus on Jefferson’s plight. I’d always thought that if a plight belonged to anyone, it belonged to Grant, because Jefferson’s story had been told so many times in so many ways by so many people. You have this phrase, “playing around the note.” “Playing around the note” seems to me to be what you were doing with that story, because we know what is going to happen to Jefferson, so the focus of the story wouldn’t, obviously, be on him. There were executions of black men in the South all the time. So this wasn’t a new phenomenon.
EJG Yes. Yes, you’re right.

LAB And of course, much depends on who is doing the reviewing. I’d always said that the story was about Grant and how he changes.

EJG How they change him: Jefferson and Vivian and Tante Lou and the minister. How they change him.

LAB If we could shift gears a moment here, let’s talk briefly about the film version [1999] of the novel, starting with the actor who played Jefferson. Did you ever think that Mekhi Pfeiffer was the right person to play Jefferson?

EJG You know who I thought would be ideal to play that role, but he would have been too old, was Forest Whitaker.

LAB Yes. Forest Whitaker would have made a great Jefferson. With Mekhi Pfeiffer, I thought that the acting was a little bit stiff; it seemed to be a forced performance; it wasn’t fluid at all. And the voice just didn’t parallel what I thought would be Jefferson’s tone.

EJG Yes. You’re right. But Forest Whitaker’s too old for it. Jefferson’s about twenty, twenty-one years old.

LAB I think that the film’s casting agents could have found a “better” Jefferson than Mekhi Pfeiffer.

EJG Yes, yes, you’re right. I didn’t even know Mekhi Pfeiffer before then. And I didn’t know Don Cheadle too well, either, because they said that, ‘Don Cheadle’s playing Grant,’ and I said, ‘Who’s Don Cheadle?’ And they said, ‘Did you see that Frank Sinatra movie, the guy who played Sammy Davis, Jr.? ’ I said, ‘You mean that little short guy?’ And they said, ‘Well, he’s not that short. He just ‘got short’ when he played Sammy Davis, Jr.’ [Laughter]. Well, I think he did a pretty good job. I think Forest Whitaker would have done a good job, because the role calls for someone kind of big and clumsy; a kind of shuffling along.

LAB I feel that the author of a work should have a voice in selecting an actor for a particular role. For such a powerful novel as A Lesson Before Dying, Pfeiffer didn’t bring Jefferson’s character to the screen.

EJG No, No. I don’t think that he did.
LAB Are you satisfied with your journey from plantation scribe to Mozart and Leadbelly?

EJG Am I satisfied? Oh, I think I’ve done some things, but I think I should have done more. I should have done more. I could have done more. There are so many ifs, ifs, ifs. If I could have gone to the library when I was six years old rather than when I was sixteen years old, I could have done much more. If I’d worked harder the last twenty years than I’ve been working, I could have done more. I could have, and that’s my only regret, that I didn’t work quite as hard as I should have. Yes, I’m satisfied with some of my accomplishments, but I think they should be better.

LAB There is, in many of your works, the presence of some form of (or reference to) music. For instance, Jefferson, in A Lesson Before Dying, is partly transformed by the gift of a transistor radio; there is the great bar scene in the club in Of Love and Dust; the slow-dance scene in the club with Grant and Vivian in A Lesson Before Dying, and Phillip’s daughter’s piano-playing in In My Father’s House. Why does music have such a prominent place in your work?

EJG I’ve always enjoyed music. I play music all the time. Usually in the morning there’s a radio station here that plays three hours of classical music beginning at ten until one. My wife and I both listen to it. Then, the station plays something else. But music’s around all the time; music has always been around me, both in the country as well as when I lived in San Francisco. So it just naturally comes into my writing. I think I’ve been influenced by African American music much more than by African American literature, because I never studied a variety of fiction writing or any other writing by African American writers. During the time I was in high school and college the American white writers or the European white writers, those are the writers that I studied; their work is what I was taught. But the music was always there at home. Gospel music or blues music or jazz music was always there. Even when I was a small child, music was always around me. So music has just naturally come into the work. As I said, the formal music is

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represented by Mozart, but the music that I grew up listening to, the music that my folks have all listened to is the music of Leadbelly, Bessie Smith, and these people, and there’s the jazz music of Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, and others. No, I could not live without music. I love music.

LAB Your work graciously honors the spiritual lives of your ancestors on the Point Coupee plantation. How strong a bearing does your ancestors’ spirit have on you, not as a writer, but as a man?

EJG My aunt, who raised me, made me what I am, both as a man and as a writer. It was my aunt, more than anyone else, the way she was and the way she raised me to be. She’s the great role model in my life, more than my mother, or my father, or my stepfather or the writers I’ve read or the people I’ve met. My aunt was a real role model in my life.

LAB Have you ever managed to find her grave? I’ve read that you didn’t have enough money to come back to her funeral in 1953, and the grave is unmarked.

EJG Yes, right. I know approximately where it is, within the space of this chair and table here. There’s no marker, but I know the general area.

LAB Is there one story that you have wanted to write but has escaped you after more than fifty years of writing?

EJG You know Catherine Carmier is a love story, and I’ve always wanted to write a great, simple love story, but I think I’ve done such with Catherine Carmier as well as in with Of Love and Dust. I think I’ve attempted in those writings a great love story, but that’s one of the things I’d like to do. Just a simple love story with none of the color thing involved, race being involved. Yet, it will probably be the dullest thing in the world, because if there’s no conflict where’s the story, especially when you’re writing, living here in the south. Where’s the story if there’s no conflict? But that’s one of the things that I’d like to do. I don’t know if I’ve been thinking about it for fifty years, because I’ve been writing now a little more than fifty years.
LAB That’s right. Because you were the scribe. You were the scribe way before you went to California.

EJG Yes, that’s right. So I’d have to say it’s been closer to sixty years that I’ve been writing. And that’s me trying to write, because I’ve never perfected the art of writing. You know, you’re still learning. With every book, you’re still learning a little bit more; you’re learning how to write with every book. I look at the first draft of some of my stuff I do now, and it’s awful stuff! [Laughter]. And I go back over it again. When you were saying, “What can a young writer learn?” a young writer can learn by reading and reading and reading those writers. One of the scenes in Catherine Carmier, when Jackson comes back from California to visit his aunt, I did not know where he would meet her once he came to the house. Would he meet her in the yard? On the porch? Inside the house? Out on the road before she would get to the house? Where? I am just wondering how to bring those two people together for the first time after ten years. When I was reading Ivan Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons [1862], where the old mother and the old father meet their son, Mesarau in the yard, and the old man had told the old mother, ‘Now, when you see him, don’t you dare cry, don’t you dare cry,’ and so they meet him in the yard and the old lady throws her arms around Mesarau, and the old man standing beside her, he’s the one that’s crying, so happy that their son is back. He didn’t know how much he had changed, but he was so happy that he was back. These are the kind of things that a writer learns. Now, it seems pretty simple in reading Catherine Carmier. Oh, Miss Charlotte and Jackson had been in the yard across from each other on one of the steps. It took me a long time to figure out how to do this, how to blend it together right here, at this moment. Do you wait until he comes up the steps? Could she hold on until he comes up the steps, or will she run to the gate and meet him before he comes down the road? Exactly where? What are you going to do? Are you going to show some pride and say, “Well, I’m happy to see you, but I’m not going to do such and such a thing. I’m not going to cry.” Once you stop at the steps with that character there, well, remember, you have to keep going with this character. You have to keep that
character and that same, well, attitude throughout the story. You have to have the same person. You can’t have a person just doing one thing in one scene and then he’s a completely different person in a scene or two after that unless there’s some spacing. But if you’re trying to write a story of realism, once you establish that character you have to remember what he’s like. Another thing I do when I’m writing is going back over and over and over the previous chapters before starting the next chapter, because I want to get back to the mood of that character again. And this is one thing that young writers can learn from mature writers. Hemingway once said, “Don’t ever write when you’re stuck in any place.” Leave it when you can go back to it easily the next morning and can start writing again. I like to start with a paragraph and would write the first sentence of the new paragraph; then I’ll know exactly where I’m going to start the next time. But if you get stuck, and you don’t know where you’re going to start the next day you’re going to be in big trouble. I’ve been in big trouble when I’ve not known where to start.

LAB  Now, the story about the young woman who makes a choice to remain in the quarters [“Mary Louise”] is essentially about a woman who doesn’t have the capacity to move forward and this long-lost boyfriend who has indeed moved forward. Can we talk a little about the theme of moving forward, which is what this short story encompasses?

EJG  That’s what I was doing with Catherine Carmier: telling it from multiple points of view. That’s Louise’s chapter. Two different characters had different chapters. That’s what I was trying to figure out. That’s what I was doing with Catherine Carmier. It took me five years to write Catherine Carmier, because I didn’t know how to write it. I had no idea how to write it. That’s what I’ve been saying, that I would use Fathers and Sons by Ivan Turgenev as my bible when I was writing that book, figuring out what do you do, how are you going to meet at a certain point? That was my first novel. It’s a college student novel. You’re learning to write, you’re learning how to use all of the tricks that the professors had told you to use.
LAB In terms of the theme of manhood that permeates your longer works, can you talk about the thematic parallels, in particular the closing lines in the two short stories, “The Turtles” [1956] and “The Sky is Gray,” where each father tells his young son that he, the child, is a man?

EJG You get the same thing with A Lesson Before Dying. Tante Lou wants Jefferson to stand up like a man. In A Gathering of Old Men, when Charlie runs away and comes back and tells them all, “I’m a man now. You call me ‘Mister.’ It’s not your old ‘Charlie’ anymore. I’m a man, and you’ll treat me like I’m a man.” You know, we’ve been called boys since we were brought here in chains, so it was important that Charlie be heard. In reading so much about why young black men are in prison today, so many are fighting over their manhood in the black community, they’re fighting over their woman, “you’re not treating me as a man,” or they’re knocking this woman around because she’s not treating him like a man. So much of it is our psyche: I’ve got to be a man, I’ve got to be a man, I’ve got to be a man. And of course our mothers, when we’re born, it’s “my little man.” And we want him to be a better person than his father: “You’re the man. You’re the man. You’re the man of the house.” In In My Father’s House, Robert X does not kill the guy, and his younger brother kills the guy who rapes his sister. And he’s “the man,” he’s the man of the house now. Robert X turns against his father, because he feels that his father should have been there, but it’s his own guilt that causes him to blame the father for not being there to protect them. So the “man stuff” is always around. I think I try and put it in my writing as much as I possibly can. If an ordinary reader does not see that’s protest against the racism of segregation, then I can’t do anything else about that.

LAB I suppose those who criticized your physical absence in the civil rights protests wanted all of the protest writers to be “Stokley Carmichaels on paper” or “H. Rap Browns on paper” or “Huey P. Newtosn on paper,” and when you presented in a different forum, well, I presume that your writing was simply seen as short stories that did not mean anything, because there could no be verbal chanting of the Carmichael/Brown/Newton nature. If the
things that you wrote are not protest, then I don’t know what people were looking for.

EJG As I said before, “Just Like a Tree,” is a protest story. Here’s this woman from the North coming to get her aunt because of the violence that’s going on down there, and the young man coming to tell her, “I know the bombing is going on, and I know they want me to stop, but I cannot stop. I must continue to protest.” I was writing those stories back in the 60s. “The Sky is Gray” was written in ’62; it was published in Negro Digest in ’63.

LAB I remember Negro Digest, and, as I recall, that publication was a “protest” kind of publication.

EJG Yes! And Hoyt-Fuller [publishers] at that time was selling that story as a protest story. I remember when The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman first came out, one person who reviewed the book for a Chicago paper, one of these “Chicago intellectuals,” said she couldn’t see anything in that story until she got to the very last book of the story, the last part of the story where this little fellow, Jimmy, who goes out in the protest, the march. But she didn’t see how Miss Jane had survived all those years and years and years to come to the point where she could teach this young man to go out and do those kinds of things. This person who reviewed the book had never seen anything like it. Miss Jane was not protesting enough. I said, “Well, how do you deal with those people like that?” You know, I just continue to write. I write as well as I possibly can write. I don’t care what other people think. I’ve never felt that I had to answer any letters or anything when they wrote criticisms of or critical things about my work. I had other things to do. But I think many of them are coming around and seeing now what I have done. At the time, no, they could not accept it. I was not “black” enough.

LAB You weren’t in the street and you weren’t “leading the masses,” and you didn’t have this following of protesters behind you. Do you remember, for instance, Tommy Smith [the Olympian] in 1968?

EJG When I was writing The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman all of the demonstrations were going on at San Francisco State, and my ex-colleague and writing friends were asking me, “When are you going to come on over here and
march with us on the campus?” I said, “Well, I’m writing this book about this little old lady. She was born in slavery, and she’s going to live right up to the civil rights demonstrations.” They’d said, “Gaines, what’s wrong with you, man? We’re talking about now. We aren’t talking about some little old slave woman. We’re talking about now!” I said, “Anybody can carry a placard, but I’m going to write a book, and I think it’s going to be a pretty decent book, and I’m going to stick to that.” I was put down, because I did not join the demonstrations at San Francisco State at the time.

LAB Look at where your work is and how it’s viewed, and the canon of your work. Look at the longevity of your work. You have to listen to your heart.

EJG Yes. I think The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman has proven me right for continuing to write other stories. But I used to tell people that every time I’d heard what Bull O’Connor [a former governor of Alabama] had done with his [cattle] prods and his dogs and with his hoses, I’d try and write a better paragraph that day. I’d say that I was going to write “a better, stronger page today. I’m going to beat him, and this is my protest.”

LAB Even as a teenager, when I initially read The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, I thought the story was protest writing. As a young reader I didn’t know at the time that there was a term, so to speak, for this kind of writing, but I remember calling it “strong storytelling.” I’d always been a reader and had, as a teen, started reading Wright, Baldwin, Cleaver, and others, but when I read The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, I felt that the storytelling format would make for its perseverance. When I was ten years old I read Ethel Waters’ autobiography, His Eye is on the Sparrow [1951], in a couple of days. The book wasn’t, of course, protest writing, but even at that young age my reading interests had started to shift, and I’d started paying more attention to the writers that I was reading.

EJG Yes, yes. What’s so great about The Autobiography Miss Jane Pittman is that if anybody can survive in this mad, crazy, racist, segregated world to be one-hundred-ten years old and still appreciate ice-cream, that is what I consider heroic. Those are the heroes that I admire, because those were the ones that would
help me up here, to help me get to the shoulders so that I can be able to talk to you. Not many of us can survive, not many of us are willing to survive for our children to the point that we can live to be one-hundred years old.

**LAB** Can you talk a bit about your relationship with Dorothy “Stinker” Oppenheimer, your literary agent? How critical and brutal was she in terms of the work that you submitted to her?

**EJG** I don’t think she intended to be brutal, I just think that she was trying to make me a better writer. She would comment on incomplete stuff--well, it could be incomplete, but if she thought that I could do much better, then she was sure going to use that little red pencil. But she was my confidante; she was everything to me. We had an association for thirty-one years, from 1956 to 1987; she died in 1987. The first story that she saw was “The Turtles.” It was published in a little literary magazine at San Francisco State, and she was just beginning her agency in San Francisco at the time. She got in touch with one of my teachers, and my teacher told me, “There’s a literary agent, a little old lady who’s looking for writers; she’d like to meet you and talk to you.” And she saw “The Turtles,” and she said that she loved that story. She told me, “Whenever you write another story or anything like that, always send it to me.” And that was the beginning. She came here [to San Francisco] when she was a teenager, and she’d gone to one of the better schools back east. I think it was either Vassar or Radcliffe. She was very well educated, extremely well educated, and she loved music. She made me aware of classical music, because I used to go to her place all the time. She lived in Pacific Heights there in San Francisco. There was this big radio, a giant radio, and she’d always play this classical music, because we had all those radio stations there in San Francisco that played music all the time. I was always surrounded by music. When I’d go back home, I would play jazz or something else. But the music was there in her place, and we’d sit around and talk. But when it came down to writing, she’d say, “E, listen, this is not up to par yet,” and she’d say, “I know you can write, because I read ‘The Turtles.’” Someone once told me that “The Turtles” was the best thing that I had ever written and after that was *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. I said, “Come on! ‘The Turtles’ don’t come
close.” But they said, “Oh, yes! It’s the best thing that you’ve ever done!” [Laughter].

**LAB** It’s one of your earlier stories that embraces the theme of manhood.

**EJG** Yes. I was about twenty-three at that time, and the reason I wrote that story was because I couldn’t write essays. I was taking this class titled “Expository Writing 110.”

**LAB** On your first paper you made a “D.”

**EJG** Yes, I probably did.

**LAB** On your second paper, you made a “D+.”

**EJG** Uh-huh.

**LAB** On the third paper you made a “D-.”

**EJG** Uh-hum.

**LAB** Every time you’d go to the professor’s office to discuss these papers, you’d say that you wanted to do some creative writing, and the professor would say that the course wasn’t a creative writing course.

**EJG** Right, right.

**LAB** So that’s when “The Turtles” came in?

**EJG** Right, right. So he said, ‘Ok, if you can do better, try and write a story, which I did. And he liked it. As a matter of fact, we couldn’t think of a title, and he said, “We can’t call it ‘The Voice of a Turtle,’ because there’s a big play in New York right now with that title.” So we just said, “Let’s call it ‘The Turtles.’” And he passed it around, and the different professors saw it and liked it. And at that same time we were organizing a literary magazine on campus, and I had the first story published in the magazine. It was published on page three.

**LAB** And Transfer magazine is still in publication now.

**EJG** Yes! Transfer magazine is still in publication. But that was the first story that was published.

**LAB** Could you talk a little about the beautification ceremony that’s held on the burial grounds every October here in Oscar?
EJG  Yes. It’s a Beautification Day, the Saturday before Halloween. It’s in the cemetery back here, about three-quarters of a mile from where we are right here. We ask the people whose ancestors are buried back there to come around and cut grass or plant flowers or wash the tombs. But we keep it up, year round, my wife and I. We keep the cemetery up, but we just want to get a gathering of the people, a kind of gathering of the masses, the descendants here, once a year. The rest of the time we try and do it ourselves.

LAB  Very nice. What a wonderful tradition you have established here in memory of the ancestors.

EJG  Yes. Yes, we think so.

LAB  Well, this concludes my interview with Mr. Ernest J. Gaines. It is 2:05 p.m., May 31, 2006, and this is Lillie Anne Brown. Thank you, Mr. Gaines.

EJG  Thank you.

LAB  Thank you for a very, very lovely interview.

EJG  Well, I just hope you get something good out of it.

LAB  I’m certain that a lot of good things will come from the interview, and I really do appreciate everything that you and Mrs. Gaines have done and have allowed me to do here this morning and this afternoon.

EJG  Well, we’re glad to have you, and thank you for the presents and the commemoration there [framed plaque in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the publication of “The Turtles”] and especially the gifts of the [whimsical, ceramic] turtles, the cd’s, and the “spirits.”

End of Interview
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lillie Anne (Gray) Brown is a native of Tallahassee, FL. A graduate of Amos P. Godby High School, she attended Florida A&M University and earned an undergraduate degree in English and a master’s degree in Secondary Education with a concentration in English. She began her teaching career in Waycross, Georgia, at Center Jr. High School. She taught high school English for several years in the Gadsden (Quincy, FL) County and Leon County (Tallahassee) school districts. She currently teaches in the Department of English at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee, FL.