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## Confrontation of Male Characters in Ernest Gaines' *The Sky is Gray, In My Father's House* and *A Lesson Before Dying*

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### Introduction

Throughout his public writing, Ernest Gaines has been consistently asked about the themes of his novels and short stories. Because of his desire to express Black manhood, interviewers and critics have recognized Gaines as a current fiction voice for African American men. In a 1990 interview with Marcia Gaudet, Gaines addressed this trend, saying, .I think I know more about the black male because I am male myself. I know something about his dreams. I listened to them when I was a kid growing up, I've drunk with him, I've been in the army and athletics-I know what men dream about. All men dream about certain things. All men have hopes.. (43). Gaines's decision to address the struggle of Black males begins in his own experience as a man and expands to include the dreams of all men. Gaines feels he needs to address the Black male struggle because he has lived it and anticipated a better life for both himself and the other Black men he encountered. Gaines's desire to tell the stories of males becoming men begins in his childhood on a Louisiana plantation and continues into his young adulthood. As a child in the South being raised by sharecroppers, Gaines experienced firsthand many of the situations his characters undergo. Because his family still lived on the plantation where the older generations were forced into slavery, as a child he was exposed to racism, lack of education, poverty, and the remnants of plantation life. When Gaines lived on the plantation he was constantly exposed to harsh living conditions, hard labour, and destitution. Once Gaines left the South and began his writing career, he was able to share the stories of his childhood through his characters. But more importantly, Gaines was able to share the hardships that he saw young black men endure. Because he was raised in a society of historical racial division, Gaines saw the demoralization of men both in his generation and the older generation before him. In his fiction, particularly .*The Sky Is Gray, In My Father's House, and A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines represents in his males not just the struggles he saw in the South, but the struggles many young African American males feel trying to find their manhood in a society that dominates them.

Ernest Gaines was born on January 15, 1933, in a small south Louisiana town of Oscar in Pointe Coupee Parish. Like five generations of his family before him, Gaines spent his childhood on the River Lake Plantation in the old slave quarters. During World War II both Gaines's mother and stepfather moved to California, leaving him to be reared by his Aunt Augusteen. In his adulthood, Gaines continues to praise his aunt and stresses the influence she had on him and his literary characters. Crippled since birth, Gaines's aunt could

not work in the fields like the other women on the plantation, but she would stay busy cleaning the house and fulfilling other domestic responsibilities while raising Gaines and his siblings. Reflecting on his aunt, Gaines told Tom Carter, My aunt never felt sorry for herself. And the people did not feel sorry for her. She had a great moral strength. I know the kind of burden she carried trying to raise us and I feel any character I wrote about has to have a burden. (82). Like his aunt, many of Gaines's male characters have a great moral strength. However, it is smothered by the society in which they live, and it becomes their responsibility to unearth their manhood and their strength.

When he was not working the fields, Gaines attended school in a one-room Church in the quarters and then a Catholic school for African-Americans that educated black youth through seventh grade. Like many of his male children characters, the school year for Gaines, and other Black children, corresponded with the crop season. Gaines often tells stories of going to school with no desks, old books, no toilet, and a superintendent who came twice a year. Because there was no high school for Black children or around his plantation, Gaines decided to leave the South and move to California to join his mother and stepfather. While in California, Gaines visited a public library for the first time and fell in love with literature. Gaines often shares this experience with other writers telling them, I discovered the Russians, Turgenev, Gogol who spoke of peasants. Then the French, Flaubert, Maupassant, Zola. But no one was telling the story of my people. Thus, as a teenager, I decided to write. (Gaudet 6). Gaines enjoyed the stories of these minority authors because he could identify with their struggle. His childhood in Louisiana exposed him to harsh conditions of life and the unfair treatment towards Black males. Gaines successfully tells the Black male's story because of this experience in the library as well as his belief that all men have dreams and desires to be more than expected of them.

When Gaines made the decision to write about his life and people that he knew living in the South, he began to tell his childhood stories and occurrences through his characters. Like his own childhood on a Louisiana plantation, Gaines's stories take place in an imaginary plantation region named Bayonne. Gaines tells Gregory Fitzgerald, I went into the fields when I was about the age of eight, or may be nine. I think my first job was picking potatoes. So, by the time I left for California, I knew a lot about the work and life on a plantation. (7). In his novels, Gaines draws upon his own experiences in the South, as well as stories he heard or other people he met as a child. He tells the hardships of people because of plantation life. Although there was no more slavery, Gaines saw daily its effects in his life because his family was still suppressed living on the old plantation. Likewise, his characters live the effects of southern plantation life and must overcome many of the same daily hardships to become men.

In August of 1963, the Negro Digest published one of Gaines's first short stories, The Sky is Gray. Told in the voice of a young boy, it follows the boy and his mother on a journey to the city to get the boy's tooth removed. While on the journey James, who bears Gaines's own middle name, begins to understand his mother's desires for him to become a man not only through her instructions and insistence for manhood, but also through his own experience of racism. In a 1986 interview, Gaines tells William Parrill of his own experience

as a young child travelling to the city to see a dentist for a toothache. Like James, Gaines also began to feel racism as he rode the bus into town. He tells Parrill, Much of what little James goes through. I went through. I did have a toothache as a child, we had to ride in the back of the bus in the mid-forties, we could not eat up-town, we could not walk in a place to get warm or anything like that, and his mother was somewhat like my mother. (182). In addition to the tooth incident, much of what James undergoes in the short story is based on Gaines's childhood in Louisiana. The story is set on a small plantation where the women care for James and his brothers since his father is at war. The survival skills that James learns at the beginning of the story, leading to his discovery of manhood, are also based on Gaines's experiences caring for his brothers and sisters. He tells Parrill, ..I had to kill birds in order to eat, and I am the oldest of the family, so I had to look after my younger brothers and sisters. I went through all of that in a period of say ten years, but I crowded all of that into his life in a period of a daytime. (182). James's experiences are all shaped by Gaines's own trials as a child. However, Gaines is quick to emphasize that James is not Gaines, but the symbol of all male children as they try to understand what it means to be a man.

Following the publication of his short stories, Gaines's popularity increased with the release of his novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Because Gaines's audience was drawn to his title character as she was raised through slavery and created a life for herself in the South, the novel received favourable reviews. Seven years later, Gaines released his next novel, *In My Father's House*. The responses to the novel were mixed as many of his readers struggled with the omniscient narrator, the lack of humour, and the struggle of Phillip Martin, a civil rights activist, to resolve his past and become a man and father to his family. Gaines himself was unsure of the novel taking seven years to address the struggles of father and son relationships. However, Gaines is quick to admit that the novel had been ..kicking my ass for ten years.. (Tooker 100).

As a child on the plantation and ancestor of slaves, Gaines experienced firsthand the struggles of fathers and sons because of slavery. This conflict, seen in *In My Father's House*, was a subject Gaines knew he had to approach. Eventually, Gaines decided to model his book after a Greek tragedy. Like the characters of Greek tragedies, Phillip Martin is a great man who falls and must get himself back up. Although Gaines devoted much time to the novel, and approached a subject that has disturbed him, he still does not like to talk about or read from the novel. In an interview with Mary Doyle, Gaines says, ..That book is a hard one for me to talk about. I don't ever read from it when I go to colleges and universities. It is a book that I had to write because I was haunted by the idea. It cost me more time and pain than any book I've written. (162). Gaines's audience's reaction to the novel is similar to the pain Gaines experienced while creating the characters. The story reminds his audience that a man is more than a father. He is an individual that must learn about his own manhood before he can successfully reach his children.

Over twenty years after the publication of *In My Father's House* and *The Sky is Gray*, Gaines continued to address his theme of suppressed manhood, and relationships between males. In his most recent novel, *A Lesson before Dying*, Gaines explores the relationship between two seemingly different males from the same plantation. Grant Wiggins and

Jefferson become friends while Jefferson is on death row for a crime he has not committed. During their time together, the two characters teach each other to be men in the face of adversity. Like his other stories, *A Lesson before Dying* is set in Louisiana and continues to emphasize his themes of racism and oppression towards men during the 1940s. Again taken from experiences that Gaines heard about in the South, the book was heavily researched before its publication. Wanting to remain as accurate as possible, Gaines visited Louisiana to speak with lawyers and sheriffs to learn the history and procedure of executions. Although at times learning of the past was challenging to Gaines, he wanted to remain true to the era. While researching the novel Gaines told Parrill, ..I want to know exactly what the prison cells looked like in the forties and fifties. I want to know what kind of clothes the prisoners wore, what kind of food they ate, what kind of exercise they took. I want to know the windows; I want to know all these sort of things. (199). Gaines is able to tell the story of these two men successfully because of his extensive research. The decade as well as the racism of the 1940s is seen in the prison setting and guards, as well as Grant's teaching position on the plantation.

Gaines's stories and characters begin with his experiences and childhood in the South but expand to show a struggle that many young Black males endure. Because of his own history in the South, Gaines is able to express the frayed feelings of Black males as they try to discover what is expected of them and their function in life and society. However, Gaines reaches beyond his own experiences by grasping deeper into the historical struggles that Black males have endured. Gaines's exploration into the male psyche begins with his belief that Black male's manhood was stolen at slavery. In an interview following the publication of his collected short stories *Bloodline* Gaines said, ...You must understand that in this country the black man has been pushed into the position where he is not supposed to be a man ,my heroes just try to be men; but because the white man has tried everything from the time of slavery to deny the black this chance, his attempt to be a man will lead to danger. (Shelton 201). The historical records of slavery not only support Gaines's thoughts but add to the humiliation the Black male endured under the White male.

The Black male's deflation of manhood began in Africa. Robbed from a patriarchal society and forced into slavery, the Black male left Africa with a main essence of his culture, family, stolen from him. After suffering the boat ride to America under horrific conditions the Black male became a commodity to White society. Because the White males knew the Black males could manage the heavy labour, and succeed at it more than women, every physical aspect of the Black male could be scrutinized by White society whenever they wished. His body, face, teeth, hands and much more were carefully inspected to evaluate his capability to work long hours in the fields. No longer important as an individual, the Black male became a body that could be bought and sold to reap profit. Clyde Franklin II writes of the Black male's arrival into America, ...Uprooted from their country, their tribes, their families, these males and those who followed were taken to various Southern port cities, auctioned off like cattle, and enslaved for the duration of their lives. (4). It was during the continued auctions that the Black male's loss of manhood was truly felt. He had established himself as a man in Africa by caring for his family, following his tribal religion, and becoming a model for other

Black youth to emulate. In Africa, the Black male was mentally strong and physically domineering. But in America, his worth was determined by only his labour.

The White male succeeded in forcing manhood out of the Black male's memory by demeaning his work and role as a man. While working the White male's field, the male slave acquired no benefits from his labour. Instead, he would watch daily the White male receive financial gain because of his work. At the same time, he was subjected to periodic beatings, lynching, and watched as his women were sexually and physically abused. Unable to fulfill the instinct to protect his woman, the Black male was mortified and developed a sense of self-loathing. His self-esteem was further challenged while watching his children suffer. Like his woman, the Black male could offer no comfort as his children were forced into hard labour and also subjected to beating and sexual abuse.

Robert Staples writes of this experience, ...The African male saw his masculinity challenged by the rape of his women, the sale of his children, the rations issued in the name of the woman and children bearing her name, while his presence went unrecognized. (2). All the power the Black male held in Africa was taken from him in America. Not only could he not protect his wife and children, but his very existence was taken from him. The Black male became not only a labourer, but a means to continue to produce workers for the field without the importance of family or fatherhood.

During the Black male's suffering and degradation of his character, the White Society's obsession with him began to form. The Black male became a symbol of mystery to many White males and females because of his body and skin colour. Slowly, he was studied by the White males to determine the origin of his intelligence and capabilities. Wanting to satisfy their own curiosities, the White males developed an obsession to discover if the Black male was as human as himself. Thomas Jefferson, one of America's founding fathers and member of the Enlightenment, often studied Black males and females to determine their place as humans. After much investigation Jefferson concluded, ...that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances are inferior to the whites in the endowment both of body and mind. (143). Jefferson's conclusion and other opinions formed by White society became another means for the White males to rob Black males of their manhood. Furthermore, these studies would lay the foundations for justification of the treatment of African Americans both during slavery and after abolition.

When Black males finally received their freedom, confusion about their manhood heightened. An outcast from society for all of his time in America, the Black male did not know how to provide for his family or function as a free man. At first it looked somewhat hopeful for the Black male as the federal government came to his side and released him from the oppression of his slave owner. Wanting to celebrate his new-found freedom, the Black male soon found himself again enslaved by Jim Crow laws and racism that only emphasized his belief that his manhood was below the White male's manhood.

According to Joan Johnson, once the federal government withdrew from the South, .Afro-American men were once again denied the opportunity to provide adequately for their

families. (8). Once again the Black male's manhood was questioned as he lived as a slave but was declared a free man. He was denied work, money, and even a home. Franklin writes of this time in America, ...Still not understanding what was expected of them, black males during this period were assigned an inferior no masculine status by law, by custom, and in some instances by violence. (5). The same struggles the Black male endured as a slave continued in his freedom. He had no foundation to base his manhood, but wandered trying to fulfill the instinct to provide for his family. However, this instinct continued to be unfulfilled as the Black male fought with society and law.

As the laws continued to show that Black males were lower than the other males, the younger generation of Black males could find no example of manliness to follow. Becoming a lost generation during the first years of freedom, the younger Black male strived to find his place in society and simply to survive. Deemed outcasts by society, many young Black males migrated north or stayed in the South determined to overcome their surroundings. Unfortunately, the young males rarely were able to fight their oppression. Instead, like the older generation they too were subjected to beatings, racism, lynching, and humiliation.

At the same time, younger Black males rarely had examples of true fatherhood. Because they were separated by slavery, fathers and sons lacked the connection needed to teach and learn manhood. When they received their freedom, these young Black males began to seek out their fathers and either never found them or were disappointed at the relationship that could never be formed properly to redeem years of separation. In an interview with Doyle, Ernest Gaines expanded on this idea, saying, ...The father and son were separated when they were brought to this country over three centuries ago. The white man did not let them come together during slavery, and they have not been able to reach each other since. (Lowe 163). Because of years of slavery and dehumanization of Black males, father and son relationships were never built on a firm foundation. The new generation continued in the same cycle as the previous slave generation because of society's treatment of them and the lack of foundation of manhood. Like their predecessors, these new generations of Black males were confused about their own manhood and escaped their confusion with anger, lack of education, and hostility.

To explain these feelings of frustration and oppressed manhood that he saw in the South, Gaines has his male characters on a journey to discover the root of these feelings. The male characters in Gaines's fiction are at war with their own acceptance to become men. Because they live in a society that has destroyed their manhood and robbed them of their self-esteem, Gaines's males no longer realize the significance of being men. The constant demoralization of their manhood has led these males to suppress years of anger and frustration. Gaines's fiction's male characters are forced to confront their need to become men. By overcoming the obstacles of family, society, White supremacy, and years of robbed independence these men learn from each other the importance of change.

Eventually, they are able to determine build their self-esteem, and learn how to become men by forgiving their pasts and releasing their doubts. Gaines's short story, *The Sky Is Gray...* It is important to begin with this short story not only to establish Gaines's theme of

manhood in his earlier fiction, but also to show that Gaines sees potential in all of his male characters, even the young children. This paper will follow chronologically Gaines's story showing James, the main character, progresses throughout the story until he understands how to become a man. This progression includes his understanding of sacrifice and provision, finding a man to model, and understanding the concept of work for money.

The focus on Gaines's troublesome novel *In My Father's House*. The two main male characters, Phillip Martin and Robert X, will be contrasted to show both of their struggles to find their manhood. Philip Martin's journey to analyze his past and fulfill his fatherhood responsibilities will serve as the outline of this paper. It is only because of Philip's journey that he stops making excuses and understands that he has never discovered his manhood. Like his father, Robert X also takes a journey to discover the manhood that was robbed of him when his father left. However, he fails to reach his goal of manhood and ultimately kills himself. This research paper will expand on the first to show that there is denial and failure in the quest of manhood.

Finally, present research paper examines Gaines's recent novel *A Lesson before Dying* as two males discovering their manhood through each other. Unlike *In My Father's House*, the two males are able to work together and teach each other that manhood can be achieved in every situation, whether on a plantation or on death row. It is important to conclude that – To show the progression in Gaines's. Novels - ...he begins with a child and moves through a father that fails to teach his son how to be a man before he dies and barely recognizes his own manhood, to a positive novel that has two men supporting each other. This final statement will show that Gaines not only wishes his characters to find the manhood being taught to them, but he ultimately desires his male characters to learn from, and support each other, on the journey to reconcile the past and prepare for the future.

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