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Burdens and Blessings:
An Examination of the Works of Ernest J. Gaines from an Agrarian Perspective

Ellen Gray M. Hogan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, March, 1994.

Burdens and Blessings:
An Examination of the Works of Ernest J. Gaines from an Agrarian Perspective

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One	3
Chapter Two	12
Chapter Three	29
Conclusion	65
Works Cited	68

Introduction

In Ernest Gaines's finest novels and short stories, those that draw the reader into breathtaking enveloping action sequences, Gaines writes about what he knows from experience--the rural community of southern Louisiana plantation life in the 1940's. Born on January 15, 1933, in Oscar, Louisiana, Gaines grew up in the slave quarters of River Lake Plantation working as a kitchen boy and, by the time he was nine, working the fields picking potatoes for fifteen cents a day. He left Louisiana at the age of fifteen to join his mother and stepfather in California.

In four of Gaines's novels, Catherine Carmier (1964), Of Love and Dust (1967), The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), and A Gathering of Old Men (1983), as well as a collection of his short stories, Bloodline (1968), there are subtle but meaningful ways in which his characters are connected to the land. Gaines's agrarian themes often give meaning to the lives and communities of older people in his work, who are at times starkly contrasted with more ambitious and often angry youths who appear as products of a modern industrial society.

By first looking at Ernest Gaines's ties to rural Louisiana and his sense of family, place, and time, I will show the importance of the setting he uses for most of his stories. Indeed, understanding Gaines's own experiences, and the way in which they are molded and transfused into his novels, reveals the source of their strength. Next, I will give a definition and overview of the agrarian tradition in Southern literature, and look briefly at its philosophical values as

stated in the agrarian tracts of I'll Take My Stand (1930) and several other publications about the 1920's movement. Jean Toomer's Cane (1923) and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) will be given special emphasis for their particular influence on Gaines's work; both novels reveal positive connections to the land through agrarian themes. A close reading of the four novels and short stories by Gaines reveals why Gaines, a product of a later generation of Southern writers, chooses to respond over and over again to the relationship of the people to the land. Amazingly, his characters respond positively to the land even in the face of adversity, a characteristic which will be explored at length. Finally, a conclusion to the thesis will reveal the meaning of Gaines as an Agrarian. Subtle but powerful, Gaines's agrarian themes speak to today's readers with a message--his work indeed teaches us and reminds us of what truly makes communities thrive, and what it takes truly to be human--courage, honor, virtue, and integrity. Ernest Gaines's work is on the surface easy to read, but with a closer look, it has profound meaning. His messages are universal and timeless; let us begin now to hear them.

Chapter One

Ernest Gaines: A Time and Place

When I was born in 1933, white families still owned all the land. My folks went into the fields for them at sunrise and came home at sunset . . . chopping cotton and cutting cane by hand. Later on, the same land would be farmed by sharecroppers but everything would still be done by hand, especially by the black sharecroppers. And later the tractors would come in and move the mule out of there. And later still the more sophisticated machinery, the mechanical cotton pickers and corn pullers, would move the tractors out. But my period is about those 30 years before the machines pushed people into towns and up north into military service. And that's enough to write about. I don't need any more.

--Ernest J. Gaines, from The Washington Post, July 1993.

In nearly all of his work, writer Ernest Gaines centers his writing in a particular place, the "quarters" of a plantation near the fictional setting of Bayonne, Louisiana, during the 1930's and 1940's. This began with the publication of his first novel, Catherine Carmier (1964), and has continued with his latest novel, A Lesson Before Dying (1993). Gaines's July, 1993, interview in Oscar, Louisiana, with Washington Post writer Ken Ringle reinforces the importance of the "period" Gaines finds himself moved and inspired to write about. Examining with careful detail the rural southern Louisiana plantation where Gaines grew up, the influence of family members and friends, and his early childhood experiences and education reveals much

about Gaines's artistic inspiration. Indeed, then one can more fully appreciate his sense of place and deep understanding of his people's physical and spiritual communion with the land.

Ernest James Gaines was born January 13, 1933, on River Lake Plantation near Oscar, Louisiana, a plantation community in the Mississippi Flood Plain region of the state. The plantation was founded in 1780 through a French land grant to Isaac Gaillard, and is located near False River, where in the 1800's and early 1900's cotton and other commodities travelled south. A large Louisiana colonial style home was built, and by 1823 River Lake Plantation boasted "2,000 acres, a cotton gin, a sugarhouse, two pigeon houses, and thirty slave cabins, one of which [was] later Gaines's first home" (Simpson 1). Much of the description of the "big house" in <u>Bloodline</u> and <u>The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman</u> is based upon the River Lake plantation home.

Gaines's childhood home was "the sixth house down the road" in the plantation quarters. Like all the others in the row, it was a "gray, unpainted wooden shack with its tin roof, sagging porch, garden, and clothes line. . . . It had no electricity, no running water, no inside plumbing" (Simpson 1). These descriptions reappear numerous times in Gaines's fiction and Gaines uses his childhood experiences and impressions as a touchstone to locate his characters in a set of "quarters" nearly identical to his own.

Charles Rowell, in his 1985 article "The Quarters: Ernest Gaines and A Sense of Place," writes:

> To understand the Gaines canon, we must explore its symbolic geography. We can begin with the quarters, the

> focal place and central metaphor of his parish. To examine the quarters community as a phenomenon in Southern history, and as a physical, social, and political entity in Gaines's work is to tell much about the symbolic, temporal reality of his fictional world. (735)

Gaines gives his readers episodes of life in the quarters which span one hundred years. The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971) begins during the Civil War, while A Gathering of Old Men (1983) ends in the late 1970's. Other works which are centered in the quarters include Catherine Carmier (1964), Of Love and Dust (1967), and two of Gaines's stories from Bloodline (1976), "Bloodline" and "Just like a Tree." Like James Joyce's Dublin and William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, the quarters of the plantation where Gaines grew up becomes a thriving political and social community--his own fictional reality. Gaines uses this unusual setting to describe a place where inhabitants live, work, and die a part of the land. In the quarters his characters must also confront the unwritten old world "code" of slavery juxtaposed against the new world of sharecropping and civil rights; Gaines's novels explore this tension against the setting of the plantation with honesty and insight.

Like Faulkner, Gaines provides fictional names in his novels for the places where he grew up, and in doing so he acknowledges the importance of his family; New Roads is named Bayonne and St. Adrienne for Gaines' mother, Adrienne Gaines Colar, and the False River becomes St. Charles River, for his brother Charles. Finally, Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, the "parish" or county surrounding River Lake Plantation, becomes St. Raphael Parish in honor of

Gaines's stepfather Raphael Norbet Colar. Although the places Gaines writes about in his fiction are clearly a "dying physical entity in historical reality," as Rowell explains, the fictional quarters remain a place of communion and community where "Gaines, the man and the artist, returns again and again for perception and sustenance" (750).

Just as Rowell recognizes the importance of Gaines's setting, Michael Fabre in his article "Bayonne or the Yoknapatawpha of Ernest Gaines" also praises Gaines's depth of character and sense of place. Faulkner's shadow hovers over every American novelist trying to depict the South. "This is perhaps more true for black novelists," writes Fabre, "because Faulkner spoke of his people with so much depth of times and often with so much compassion that his racial myths are the most indestructible." Fabre goes on to write that of all the new (1950's) black novelists, "Ernest Gaines alone really takes up Faulkner's challenge." He sees Gaines as a regionalist, whose native Louisiana, "or more precisely the network of hamlets and estates which surround Bayonne, defines the entire universe" (110).

Growing up on River Lake Plantation, Gaines was a descendant of five generations of Creole slaves who lived, worked, and were buried on the place. Both Gaines's mother, Adrienne, who had him at the age of sixteen, and Gaines's father, whose name Gaines chooses not to disclose, worked in the sugarcane fields. Gaines's father left the family when Gaines was eight and his mother took a job in New Orleans and later remarried. Until he was fifteen, Gaines stayed on the plantation with his great-aunt Augusteen Jefferson, a crippled woman whose courage and determination would be a profound influence in his life. The following excerpts from Marcia Gaudet and

Carl Wooton's book Porch Talk With Ernest Gaines reveal the tenderness and respect Gaines feels when recalling Augusteen Jefferson and her influence:

> MG: You have often used the phrase "survival with dignity" in describing your characters, and this seems evident especially in "The Sky is Gray."
>
> GAINES: Yes, that's something I got from my aunt, and from reading Hemingway, the grace-under-pressure thing--the "dignity under pressure" and "survival with dignity" are really the same thing. (66)
>
> MG: You have often talked about your Aunt Augusteen Jefferson and her influence on you. You have described her as being very strong physically and morally and very alert mentally. Though she could not walk, she cooked, washed clothes, and cared for you and your brothers and sisters. You have said that she had the greatest impact on your life, not only as a writer but also as a man.
>
> GAINES: Right. Unless you include her, you can't write about me at all. (67)

A final example of Augusteen Jefferson's influence on Gaines not only as a man but as a writer occurs in a 1975 Essence interview:

> I know the kind of burden she carried trying to raise us and I feel any character I write about has to have a burden. The main character has to have a heavy burden, one that can knock the average person down; sometimes it does, but he has to get up. This is the philosophy I have, if I have any at all, because of the struggle of my

> aunt, the struggle of my race, the struggle of people in general. Any person who's worth a goddamn must really struggle. (Carter 52-53)

Other influences on Gaines include his maternal grandmother, Julia McVay, who worked as a cook in the River Lake plantation house. She was "80 percent white and a master of Creole cooking," and like Miss Jane Pittman, no job was too difficult for her to tackle. Gaines's paternal grandfather, "like Felix in 'Bloodline'" (Simpson 5), was in charge of maintenance, yard work, and equipment repair on the plantation.

Gaines began work in the fields at the age of eight for fifty cents a day and by the time he was twelve worked the swamps, the poorest land around the plantation. Work usually began with April planting and continued through until mid-October. In the winter months, Gaines attended school in the plantation's small Negro church until he was twelve. Some years the classes were only held five months out of the year, and the church had

> no inside toilet, no chairs, no desks, only the pews or benches used for church service. In order to write the students either used their laps, or got down on their knees and wrote on pews. Drinking water was drawn from the well, and wood was hauled by the students to burn for heat. (Simpson 6)

By the time he had reached the third grade, Gaines was more educated than most of the people living in the quarters. He would often write letters for elders, deliver messages, and read newspapers to his Aunt Augusteen. Oral tradition was an important aspect of

Gaines's childhood and he recalls with fondness the many stories told by the elderly men in the quarters, including the ninety-year-old Pete Zeno, whose tales he used as a foundation for writing The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. Gaines continued his passion for writing and from the age of twelve until he was fifteen attended St. Augustine School in New Roads, a Catholic middle school for blacks.

Finally, when he was fifteen, Gaines left River Lake Plantation to join his mother and step-father in Vallejo, California. There he attended Vallejo High School, and in his free time began reading many of the writers who would later have the greatest impact on his work. "Hemingway, Faulkner, Twain, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Joyce, and De Maupassant" (Simpson 16) were all to influence his writing style, and by the time Gaines was sixteen he knew he wanted to become a writer. In a 1969 interview Gaines professed:

> When I went to California . . . I was terribly lonely for my friends and relatives. . . . I read and read, but I did not see myself and my friends and my family in the stuff that I read. I didn't see us in the Southern writers. I didn't even see myself in the Russian writers, although the Russians came close. So I began to try to do it myself and of course, I went back to my childhood to write about. I suppose that most writers, when they first start out try to write about their childhood, and that is what I did. (Gregory 333)

A novel which would someday become Catherine Carmier was attempted, mailed to New York on yellow typing paper, and rejected

soon afterwards. In 1964, sixteen years later, a much revised version of Catherine Carmier was the first novel Gaines published.

After graduating from Vallejo Junior College in 1951, Gaines served in the Army for two years, and was stationed in Guam. He went back to San Francisco State College in 1955, and received his Bachelor of Arts in Language Arts in 1957. A turning point came when Gaines was offered a Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship at Stanford University. Here, under the direction of Stegner, Gaines pursued his passion along with writers including Luis Harass, Ken Kesey, and Wendell Berry. Gaines to this day calls Stegner his mentor, and dedicated a recent April, 1993, reading at the Folger Library in Washington, D. C., to the late Stegner's memory.

In 1971, shortly after the highly praised novel The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman was published, Gaines gave a talk entitled "Miss Jane and I" at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In it he describes the teenage years he spent in California looking for black literature that could detail the Louisiana world he had grown up in. He found the descriptions of peasant life by Turgenev, Chekhov, and Pushkin superior to all others, but as Gaines reveals, they "could not give me the satisfaction that I was looking for. . . . I had drunk clabber, but never kvass" (27-28). Gaines continues by saying:

> I wanted to smell that Louisiana earth, feel that Louisiana sun, sit under the shade of one of those Louisiana oaks, search for pecans in that Louisiana grass in one of those Louisiana yards next to one of those Louisiana bayous, not far from a Louisiana river. I wanted to see on paper

> those Louisiana black children walking to school on cold days while yellow busses passed them by. I wanted to see on paper those black parents going to work before the sun came up and coming back home to look after their children after the sun went down. . . . I wanted to see on paper the small country churches (schools during the week), and I wanted to hear those simple religious songs, those simple prayers--that true devotion. . . . I wanted to read about the true relationship between whites and blacks--about the people I had known. (28)

In order to read about these things, Gaines had to write about his own time and place; twenty-two years later, Gaines still is writing about the people and places of his childhood. Today, he still lives in California but spends a semester each year at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette. His novels create a mosaic of sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and even textures from his early surroundings. Humid, dusty summers, steaming-hot shrimp creole, ice cold beer, pecan praline tea cakes, and the faint odor of sweet-olive bushes seep through each of Gaines's pages, and bring alive the quarters of his Louisiana plantation community. His black and white people are real; their actions, triumphs, struggles, and sorrows, enveloping. And, above all, the descriptions of the lives of his people within their community have *something to say* to all who read them.

Chapter Two

Agrarianism: A Brief Southern Overview

"Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."

---From Thomas Jefferson, Notes on The State of Virginia, 1787.

In Ernest Gaines's most powerful writing, that in which he pulls the reader into the full reality of life within plantation quarters, there is a meaningful symbiotic relationship between the plantation people and their "place." Genuine virtue, spiritual and temporal love, and loyalty to family members and friends flow freely from the hearts of many of Gaines's black plantation dwellers--even in the face of hardship and racism. By considering a brief overview of historical literary agrarianism, particularly Southern Agrarianism, one can better understand life within the communities of the quarters that form within Gaines's novels. Gaines's agrarian themes also show subtle but powerful connections to the Agrarian philosophers' assessment of the American Everyman, who when faced with the decision to industrialize his nation chose to do so, and is now suffering from a moral and spiritual decline which has contributed to the breakdown of communities.

Agrarianism in American Literature (1969), a collection of essays edited by M. Thomas Inge on the theoretical, political, and

literary implications of agrarian life, provides an invaluable source of background information on the force of agrarianism within American literature. I'll Take My Stand (1930), a tract published by the now renowned group of literary artists, critics, and scholars including Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Donald Davidson, and Andrew Lytle, will be used as a basis for discussing the literary and philosophical American agrarian movement of the twentieth century. Its context and purpose will be highlighted, with special attention given to those essays which view the South as a metaphor for man in the natural world. Examples of black authors who like Gaines have threaded their works with agrarian themes also merit discussion, in particular, Jean Toomer's Cane (1923) and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) for their positive portrayal of the blacks' connection to the land.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote Notes on The State of Virginia over two hundred years ago, he was joining the ranks of some of the greatest philosophers ever to leave a mark on Western civilization, including Hesiod, Aristotle, Cicero, Virgil, and Pliny the Elder. Like Jefferson, all wrote convincingly of the virtues and superior advantages of husbandry and country life over other occupations. Similarly, in the Middle Ages and early Renaisance period of English literature the espousal of agrarian lifestyles is demonstrated in works by Langland, Chaucer, Sidney, and Shakespeare. Later, in the Restoration and Augustan Age, Dryden, Steele, Swift, Pope, and Johnson also advocated farming. Similar themes soon appeared in the Romantic works of Burns, Grey, Wordsworth, and Oliver Goldsmith, whose idyllic "The Deserted Village" praises the rural life,

and was published in 1760, just ten years before Jefferson would begin his work on Notes on the State of Virginia (Inge xv).

The claim that agrarianism has a beneficent moral effect is therefore by no means an American phenomonen, but one that has flourished throughout Western civilization. The word "agrarianism" was originally "probably derived from the Roman *lex agraria*, the agrarian law that called for an equal division of public lands" (Inge xiii). During the eighteenth century the word became an epithet of insult among aristocratic circles in industrial European countries, for it was associated with communism and equal distribution of ownership of cultivated land. But, by the twentieth century, the word "agrarian" had become no more than a synonym for "agricultural." It represents, says Inge, "a set of ideas or attitudes toward the farmer and his craft of husbandry in American writing from a philosophical, imaginative, mythical, political, or economic perspective" (xiv).

Ideas voiced by agrarians over time, according to Inge, include the following. First, the cultivation of the soil has within it a positive spiritual good and instills in the cultivator such virtues as honor, manliness, self-reliance, courage, moral integrity, and hospitality. These are derived from direct contact with physical nature, "the medium through which God is directly revealed and which serves to remind man of his finite nature and dependence on God." Secondly, only farming offers complete self-sufficiency, regardless of the state of the national economy. With farming, the standard by which an economic system is judged is not how much wealth it produces, but "how effectively it encourages freedom, individuality, and morality."

The farmer has a sense of identity--of belonging to a concrete family, place, and region. As a result his life is "harmonious, orderly, and whole, and counteracts tendencies in modern societies toward abstraction, fragmentation, and alienation." Related to this idea is the belief that technology, industry, and capitalism found in cities are often destructive of independence and dignity, and they often encourage corruption of the individual. Finally, agricultural communites where cooperation of labor and brotherhood thrive "provide a potential model for an ideal social order" (Inge xiv).

In the 1920's, these ideas inspired twelve Southerners associated with Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Together they contributed to I'll Take My Stand (1930), a collection of essays which, in the face of the industrial expansion taking place at the time of the 1920's, articulated the virtues of agrarian life by providing a scholarly discussion of the South and the merits of her agrarian tradition. Alaphabetically listed, the "Band of Prophets," as they were deemed on the fiftieth anniversary of I'll Take My Stand, were Donald Davidson, John Gould Fletcher, H. B. Kline, Lyle H. Lanier, Andrew Nelson Lytle, H. C. Nixon, Frank Lawrence Owsley, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, John Donald Wade, Robert Penn Warren, and Stark Young. Their interests and approaches to agrarianism in the essays of I'll Take My Stand stemmed from their Southern heritage as well as intellectual commitments to writing, history, art, religion, economics, sociology, and literary criticism. Extrapolations of the essays which appear in the book's introduction, "A Statement of Principles," offer a concise summary of the book's themes.

In referring to the text, the opening paragraph of "A Statement of Principles" states:

> All the articles bear in the same sense upon the book's title-subject. All tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian *versus* Industrial. (xix)

The unidentified author of the opening statement goes on to stress that community and the amenities of life suffer under the curse of an industrial society where "strictly-business" is practiced. He notes that "manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, [and] romantic love" (xxv) are all important social exchanges which "develop sensibility in human affairs" and can only be practiced in leisure. In a world of accelerated industrialism, such amenities often fall by the wayside. Quality of life and labor also suffers in an industrial world. The writer explains:

> The first principle of good labor is that it must be effective, but the second principle is that it must be enjoyed. Labor is one of the largest items in the human career; it is a modest demand to ask that it may partake of happiness. (xxix)

In the eyes of the Agrarians, labor under industrial regimes is intense, mercenary, and servile, and money becomes a means to an end rather than a means to a better quality of life. Religion, too, suffers in an industrial society, because when nature becomes industrialized in the form of cities,

> we receive the illusion of having power over nature, and lose the sense of nature as something mysterious and contingent. The God of nature under these conditions is merely an amiable expression, a superfluity, and the philosophical understanding ordinarily carried in the religious experience is not there for us to have. (xxiv)

The individual in an industrial society is therefore susceptible to a spiritual crisis, along with which often comes moral relativity. I'll Take My Stand foreshadowed the moral, spiritual and communal deterioration that is a result of heavy industrialization when it becomes what Andrew Lytle calls a "conflict between the unnatural progeny of inventive genius and men" (202). This conflict unfolds in Gaines's character Marcus in Of Love and Dust (1967), who comes from the city to the plantation having been abused by an urban ghetto environment and committed murder. "It is a war to the death between technology and the ordinary human functions of human living" (202), says Lytle in his contribution, "The Hind Tit." In his 1935 essay "I'll Take My Stand: A History," Donald Davidson says of the Agrarians' purpose in writing this manifesto: "Uppermost in our minds was a feeling of intense disgust with the spiritual disorder of modern life--its destruction of human integrity and its lack of purpose; and, with this, we had a decided sense of impending fatality" (314).

But as the author of "A Statement of Principles" points out, this is not to say that an agrarian society has no use at all for technology, scholars and universities, and the life of the cities. Nevertheless, the Agrarians espoused an ideal which said

> technically, perhaps, an agrarian society is one in which agriculture is the leading vocation, whether for wealth, for pleasure, or for prestige--a form of labor that is pursued with leisure and intelligence, and that becomes the model to which the other forms approach as well as they may. . . . The theory of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers. (xxix)

Louis D. Rubin, in his introduction to the 1962 reprint of I'll Take My Stand, makes the solid argument that the agrarianism espoused by the twelve southerners who wrote the book can best be considered as an extended metaphor of the individual in modern society. He says of the book:

> It is about man, what he is, what he should be, what he must be. Written in a time when not only the South but the nation seemed given to a frantic struggle for material possessions, it held up to examination some of the most widely-accepted assumptions of our time. (xxi)

Rubin goes on to look at the critique of the modern world that the Agrarians present through their vision of an agrarian community. Ernest Gaines provides a similiar critique of modern society by centering almost all of his work in the rural Louisiana plantation world of the 1930's and 1940's.

A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years steps forward in time to 1980, when scholars, writers, critics, and

historians gathered at Vanderbilt University to discuss the impact of I'll Take My Stand on the fiftieth anniversary of its publication. Andrew Lytle, Lyle Lanier, and Robert Penn Warren were those of the twelve Agrarians still living, and their "Discussion of the Agrarian-Industrial Metaphor" with Cleanth Brooks as mediator is recorded as the book's final chapter. All three men remark on the fact that the world of 1980 is certainly far more advanced technologically than they could ever have imagined--especially in the fields of computer science and nuclear engineering. The hazards of pollution and radiation brought about a sense of urgency that was not felt during the 1920's, "when there seemed to be infinite resources," says Lanier. He states that in the 1920's

> Urbanization and all of the ills of urban society related to the industrialism were acute problems, talked about a lot, but we did not then have in so extreme a form the urban ghetto, the ghetto society, which is a combination of a welfare society and a crime society, throwing in drugs and a few other things that get involved. (Qtd. in Havard 163)

In the same discussion, Andrew Lytle notes that in the society of 1980, there are very few family-sized farms, and far fewer family businesses than there were fifty years ago. Lytle sees the small farm "as the source of strength of the state," and notes that today's countryside is empty, with only perhaps a few people, but no community. Lytle also maintains that as a result of this failure of community,

> "The whole family as a unit of society has been damaged almost unto death. . . . The family is of first importance. It has to have location, has to be fixed somewhere. You can have a family without it, but location strengthens the family because you have gathered about a fixation on a spot of land, or even the inheritance of a business, the history of a family. Now, no family is any older than another, but the family that sees itself as older and has some inheritance that is worth passing on to the generations, is the family that is stable; such families make stable a society. You've got to have that old grandmother in the back room saying 'Have your tongue pulled out before you lie,' don't you see?" (165-166)

This emphasis on stability revolving around a matriarchy is of course what Gaines does with his stories of great-aunts, grandmothers, and godmothers who rule children and adults alike with a strong hand. Family and place--even within the quarters of a plantation where the old world unwritten code of slavery exists--are still of utmost importance in life; without them as a stronghold there comes chaos.

Agrarianism and its thematic appearances within the black man's world of prejudice, hatred, racism, and bigotry are compelling subjects. While agrarianism seems to fit easily into the white Southern writer's vision of an ideal order, few black authors have approached the subject with ease or sincerity of purpose because of the inherent connection to the life of slavery associated with the black man's predominant purpose in the South during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, two novels by black authors in

which the blacks' agrarian ties to the land are explored in a positive yet realistic light are Jean Toomer's Cane (1923) and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937).

Gaines has voiced both gratitude and praise for Cane's eclectic and innovative conglomeration of short stories and poems, and has said: "To me, that's *the* Black American novel. That's *my* novel" (Simpson 105). Gaines also says of Toomer, who lived from 1894 to 1960:

> This man has a combination of prose and poetry that we ought to have, Black writers ought to have. We're full of music, natural rhythm, you know, music, music, music. And he has more music in his prose than any of us. Unfortunately for me I discovered him after I had established a style of my own. But if I had not, I know without a doubt that he would have had the greatest influence on me. (Qtd. in Simpson 106)

Although Gaines notes that his writing style isn't derived from Toomer's work, Gaines's and Toomer's sense of place and their characters' identification with or alienation from the land are noticeably alike. Toomer was an upper-class black Washington writer who agreed to spend several months as a substitute principal at an all-black school in Sparta, Georgia, in 1921. Toomer expresses what he learned from his experiences in Sparta in a letter written to his mentor at the time, critic Waldo Frank:

> There, for the first time I really saw the Negro, not as a ps{eu}do-urbanized and vulgarized, a semi-Americanized product, but the Negro peasant, strong with the tang of

> fields and soil. It was there that I first heard the folk songs rolling up the valley at twilight, heard them as spontaneous and native utterances. They filled me with gold, and tints of an eternal purple. Love? Man they give birth to a whole new life. (qtd. in Kerman and Eldridge 83)

Toomer draws on his love to reveal these people in Cane--particularly paying attention to women and to the people's strength from "the tang of fields and soil." His unforgettable character Karintha brings to mind Gaines's evocative Catherine in Catherine Carmier. The opening poem to "Karintha" shows how Toomer uses similes to connect his characters and to their natural surroundings:

> Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,
> O can't you see it, O can't you see it
> Her skin is like dust on the east horizon,
> . . . When the sun goes down. (1)

Like many of Gaines's novels, Cane offers glimpses of the folk of the field, and describes the tension and resentment felt by blacks toward the white man. In the book's first section, awkwardness, humiliation, and the reality of a racist society are detailed with stunning imagery in the form of short stories which sometimes start or end with a one-stanza poem; interspersed between stories are poems like "Reapers," "November Cotton Flower," "Cotton Song," and "Georgia Dusk," which reveal Toomer's emotional attachment to the blacks who worked Southern soil. The last three stanzas of "Georgia Dusk" resonate with Toomer's passion for the Sparta people he grew to know, and their land:

Meanwhile, the men, with vestiges of pomp,
Race memories of king and caravan,
High priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man,
Go singing through the footpaths of the swamp.

Their voices rise . . the pine trees are guitars,
Strumming, pine-needles fall like sheets of rain . .
Their voices rise . . the chorus of the cane
Is caroling a vesper to the stars . .

O singers, resinous and soft your songs
Above the sacred whisper of the pines,
Give virgin lips to cornfield concubines,
Bring dreams of Christ to dusky cane-lipped throngs.
(22-23)

Toomer clearly recognizes and reveals the dichotomy that exists for the black who is a part of a plantation society; slaves have no choice but to work the land and therefore cannot see its value because they are not free.

Nevertheless, Toomer captures the spirituals which flow out of black men working the land. This "chorus of the cane" echoes Toomer's description of "folk songs rolling up the valley at twilight" in his letter to Waldo Frank. On another darker agrarian note, Toomer uses the setting of an old factory as a place where a black man is burned to death by a white mob in "Blood-Burning Moon." The poem which is woven through the story in several places reads: "Red nigger moon. Sinner! / Blood-burning moon. Sinner! / Come

out that fact'ry door" (53). Toomer's image of the black man dying in a factory is purposeful, implying his recognition of what happens to the black man in an industrial society.

Toomer's feelings for the land are further strengthened when the agrarian chapters of the book are compared with its second section of stories written about Washington, D. C. The first line of the opening poem/solioquy "Seventh Street" clarifies Toomer's revulsion at city life: "Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts, / Bootleggers in silken shirts, / Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs, / Whizzing, whizzing down the street car tracks" (71). The next lines of the opening paragraph show what is perhaps Toomer's crudest depiction of an urban environment:

> Seventh street is a bastard of Prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. Wedges rust in soggy wood. . . . (71)

Toomer's love for the land and distrust for his native Washington also present themselves in the book's final section "Kabnis," where Toomer, under the guise of the character Ralph Kabnis, metaphorically voices the vestiges of a slave society. It is a difficult although at times illuminating chapter, in which Toomer shows his admiration for the Southern black man's struggle for identity.

According to critic Waldo Frank, who wrote an introduction to an edition of the book, Cane "is the South." "Reading this book, I had

a vision of a land, heretofore sunk in the mists of muteness, suddenly rising up into the eminence of song" (vii), Frank says. The song is not unlike Whitman's "Song of Myself" or Sherwood Anderson's "Corn" (both Whitman and Anderson influenced Toomer's writing) in its lyrical rhythm and natural imagery. Yet its voice is still unique, for it speaks of a people whom Toomer knew and Zora Neale Hurston knew and depicted in Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937). In 1927, Hurston and Langston Hughes followed the trail of Toomer to Sparta, Georgia, on a "pilgrimage to the source of what was increasingly regarded in black circles as a seminal novel of the Afro-American experience" (Kerman and Eldridge 182).

According to biographer Ann Simpson, Gaines "has mentioned the works of writer/ethnomusicologist Zora Neale Hurston as [a] peripheral influence" (105). Published in 1937, Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of one woman's journey into selfhood. The central character, Janie, describes herself at the beginning of the novel: "Janie saw herself like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (Hurston 20). The use of natural images throughout the novel is a symbolic part of Janie's journey to wholeness at the end of the novel.

After a disastrous first marriage to the miserly Logan Killicks, Janie elopes with Joe Starks to Orange County, Florida, where Joe, an ambitious but slyly selfish man, opens a general store in an all-black town, Eatonville, and soon becomes the mayor. Starks becomes a gloating, intensely jealous husband who possesses Janie rather than loving her. She works in the store with her luxurious hair tied in

rags at Joe's insistence, and the two live in a big house that makes "the rest of the town look like the servant's quarters." "Look at the way he painted it--a gloaty, sparkly white," muses the omniscient narrator (Hurston 75).

Janie is finally released from her miserable life when Joe dies and she runs away with Tea Cake Woods, a man many years her junior. Unlike Joe, who was obsessed with money, success, and status, Tea Cake embodies music, passion, life, and love, and has a capacity for a spontaneous enjoyment of life. He takes Janie to work the land of the Everglades in Florida; the "muck," as it is called, is described as Janie sees it for the first time:

> To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. . . . Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too. (Hurston 193)

Janie is wealthy because she has inherited Joe Starks's fortune, but she still picks beans at harvest time with Tea Cake, telling him: "Ah laks it. It's mo' nicer than settin' round dese quarters all day. Clerkin' in dat store wuz hard, but heah, we ain't got nuthin' tuh do but do our work and come home and love" (Hurston 199).

The sense of community that comes from the workers planting beans on the "muck" elates Janie and she contrasts it to Eatonville:

> Sometimes Janie would think of the old days in the big white house and the store and laugh to herself. What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes? The crowd of people around her and a dice game on the floor! She was sorry for her friends back there and scornful of the others. (Hurston 200)

Working the land together brings both Tea Cake and Janie great happiness and contentment--in her overalls and with her long braid of hair swinging in the wind, Janie is at last free to be herself. Janie learns "everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh they selves" (Hurston 284). Romanticism, passion, and honest work on the land bring out the best qualities in both Janie and Tea Cake, and the two return to the "muck" even after a terrible hurricane. Tragedy takes Tea Cake's life, but even in the midst of her sadness, Janie rejoices at the lessons of true living she has learned.

Life on the land--its hardships and its rewards--are richly and poignantly depicted in both Cane and Their Eyes Were Watching God. The poetic language and musical ryhthms of both novels reflect the influence that Toomer had on Hurston. More importantly, Cane and Their Eyes Were Watching God reveal a sense of place and a passion for life felt by blacks living within an agrarian community. The parallels between Toomer and Hurston's work and their influence on Gaines are therefore stronger than has been previously acknowledged. By now examining Gaines's novels and short stories, one discovers the positive agrarian connection his characters have to

the land and the source of their sense of community even in the face of adversity.

Chapter Three

The Manifestation of Agrarian Themes in Ernest Gaines's Works

"That's something you can't see, Sheriff, 'cause you never could see it," he said . . . "You can't see the church with the people, and you can't hear the singing and the praying. You had to be here then to be able to don't see it and don't hear it now. But I was here then, and I don't see it now, and that's why I did it. I did it for them back there under them trees. I did it 'cause that tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard, and I was scared if I didn't do it, one day that tractor was go'n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that we ever was. Like now they trying to get rid of all proof that black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules--like if they had nothing from the starten but motor machines. . . . They mama and they papa people worked too hard, too hard to have that tractor just come in that graveyard and destroy all proof that they ever was."

--Johnny Paul to Sheriff Mapes in Ernest Gaines's A Gathering of Old Men, (1983).

The emphasis that Ernest Gaines places on the virtues of an agrarian way of life manifests itself through the actions and voices of his characters. Subtle agrarian themes confirm what a sharecropping form of farming offers blacks living in the quarters--self-sufficiency which encourages freedom, individuality, and morality; a sense of

place, family, and region; faith in God; and an agricultural community which is made up of family and a brotherhood of friends working together in cooperation. These agrarian ideals are evident in each successive novel that Gaines publishes between 1964 and 1983.

Beginning with Gaines's first novel, Catherine Carmier (1964), there are explicit connections to the land; these are, however, overshadowed by the encroaching tractors owned by Cajuns, and racial tension between Cajuns, whites, and blacks. With Of Love and Dust (1967), more emphasis is placed on the "quarters" of the plantation, and the positive nature of this community of friends and families is contrasted with the entrance of the hostile city boy Marcus, and his ensuing relationship with the Cajun plantation overseer's wife. A farming community that is swiftly changing and will soon no longer be able to sustain its ways is the subject of two stories, "A Long Day in November," and "Just Like a Tree" in Bloodline (1968). Similarly, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1973) provides a broader look at the slow change over time of the slave plantation into a world of poor tenants and sharecroppers, where pride is taken from those working the land. Racial tensions continue in Gaines's novel A Gathering of Old Men (1983), where the recognition of the importance of the human connection to the land manifests itself through the confessions of old men, who like Miss Jane Pittman have witnessed a lifetime of change on the plantation.

Ernest Gaines uses the tensions and hostility between whites, Cajuns, and blacks of Southwestern Louisiana to give his work conflict and action. The Cajuns in Gaines's works are the descendants of the French people who colonized Nova Scotia, then known as

Acadia, in 1604. They were expelled by the British in 1755, and many settled in Louisiana by 1762 ("Cajun" 15). There is a seething hatred between many Cajuns and blacks in Gaines's novels because Cajuns as a group prided themselves on their heritage and would not accept the black man into their own culture; also, they were usually given more responsibilities than blacks on the plantations, a fact widely emphasized in Gaines's work. Pride and racism in a Louisiana plantation society defined by stratifications of color elevates Gaines's novels to tragedies of epic proportions. Nevertheless, even in the midst of his tragic encounters, Gaines never fails to reveal the comic side of his characters' lives; their stories become enveloping because their actions and words are according to Andrew Lytle, "the real thing" (personal interview).

Catherine Carmier (1967) is Gaines's first attempt to show the lives of blacks and Cajuns working side by side on what was once a prospering sugar cane plantation. The novel's protagonist, Jackson Bradley, has returned to the plantation after living in San Francisco for ten years. His great-aunt Charlotte awaits him with the hope that he has returned to the plantation for good in order to teach. The rising action and conflict of the novel occur when Jackson struggles but fails comfortably to re-enter the agrarian sharecropping community--partly because he cannot tolerate the racial tension between Cajuns and blacks, and partly because he has lost his sense of identity living in San Francisco. He is searching for truth, but feels "like a leaf, . . . that's broken away from the tree. Drifting" (79). He hopes to find security in his love for Catherine Carmier, the daughter of a part-black sharecropper, Raoul Carmier. Raoul is a fiercely self-

reliant man struggling to maintain his farm land in the face of overwhelming competition from encroaching Cajuns. He will not tolerate Catherine seeing Jackson because Jackson is a full-blooded black man.

Part One begins by foreshadowing what is a central agrarian theme throughout the novel: the changing way of life for the rural community of plantation sharecroppers in Southwestern Louisiana. Jackson's childhood friend, Brother, waits at the filling station for Jackson to arrive, and two Cajun boys question him:

> "Yeah, I hear 'em talk about him there," Francois said. "So he come to visit the people, hanh?"
>
> "Might be to stay," Brother said. "From all I done heard 'bout it."
>
> "Stay?" Francois said. "People leaving here; not coming back."
>
> "That's what I heard," Brother said.
>
> "And what he do here?" Francois said. "Farming? It's all gone." (5)

These lines suggest several things about the predicament that plantations were in during the early 1960's. Sharecropping, which was the way many of the sugar cane plantations had operated for the past forty years, was slowly being eradicated by tractors and other sophisticated farming machine equipment used by the wealthier owners of sharecropping land. Since white Cajuns were given the best land to farm by white plantation owners, their crops yielded better crops and money to buy farm machinery. Blacks were usually left trying to do twice the amount of work in order not to lose their

land; most eventually were forced to give up farming and head North.

Sharecropping is then seen as the most positive form of farming by Gaines because blacks farm their individual plots of land. Similarly, the Agrarians argue that farming offers self-sufficiency, encourages freedom and individuality, and provides farmers with a sense of place where they can sustain a family. Still, in his essay "I'll Take My Stand": A History," Donald Davidson explains the Agrarians' viewpoint on the tenant farmer:

> We thought the role of the small farmer, or yeoman farmer, had been very much underestimated. We were concerned with the fate of the tenant farmer, with rural towns and communities, and with their importance in setting the tone of Southern life, even in the cities. We wished that the greatest possible number of people might enjoy the integrity and independence that would come with living upon their own land. (310)

Gaines realistically recognized that black farmers rarely owned their own land; he thus focuses on the individual sharecropping his own small parcel of land--a preferable livelihood to working on large tracts of land under an overseer.

When ractors mechanized farming, sharecropping began to disappear in the 1940's; Gaines's novel Catherine Carmier highlights this mechanization and the loss of self-sufficiency and individual pride in work on the land. Raoul Carmier is an embittered, enslaved man who nearly works himself to death in order that his farm and his sense of self-worth might survive. Aunt Charlotte tells Jackson:

"Raoul the only colored one now. . . . All the others done gived up. Spec' the only reason he ain't, he just so stubborn" (29).

When Jackson first sees his old home he remarks to Aunt Charlotte that his baseball field is now a sugar cane field. "They took our ballpark, too?" he asks, to which Aunt Charlotte replies, "They got it all. . . . All but what Raoul got" (30). Because of the Cajuns and their machines, everyone in the quarters but Raoul can admit that in time there will be no more black sharecropping on Mack Grover's land. Raoul's other daughter Lillian tells Catherine: "Daddy's world is over with. That farming out there--one man trying to buck against the whole family of Cajuns--is outdated" (40). Madame Bayonne, a wise old member of the plantation community who has a prophetic gift for understanding people, tells Jackson:

> "Raoul has been Della's husband only by law. Other than that, it's been the land. Not Della he loved when he married her--the land. . . . Why the land you ask? . . . He was taught to get everything from the land, which he did, and which he, through necessity, was taught to depend upon. His love for his land, his hatred for the white man, the contempt for which he looks upon the black man has passed from one generation to the other." (116)

In the end, Raoul works the land seven days a week, fourteen hours a day, because it is a part of him and his pride cannot see it taken by the Cajuns. Because of the land he is self-sufficient, and has self-respect, and although he hates the white man, he derives a sense of honor, manliness, and even courage from his hard work in the fields.

His family also has a place to live and a community of friends they can depend on.

The agricultural community that is formed around the sharecroppers in Catherine Carmier is presented as a place where family ties and friends are important. Older members of agrarian communities stand out for their strength, their positive sense of righteousness, and the role models and discipline they offer young people; in Catherine Carmier, Aunt Charlotte is a prime example of a strong older individual. When Jackson arrives home, Aunt Charlotte weeps with joy that he has at last arrived, and holds a large party in his honor. Old and young members of the community who have known Jackson all his life gather over a supper of hot gumbo, rice, and beer. But after brief hellos to everyone, Jackson "was as lost for words as they were" (67). His move from the plantation, although it has enabled him to go to college, has brought about a far greater crisis. His college degree and city experiences set him apart, and yet aren't the sole reasons for his silence. Jackson has lost his identification with place, family, and spirituality--all aspects of agrarian life. In his isolation, Jackson has lost the capacity to love. He is embarrassed by the attention he receives from the quarters people who knew him as a boy; Jackson even dislikes Aunt Charlotte's affection and has difficulty communicating with her.

Aunt Charlotte is a loving, unselfish, and religious woman who raised Jackson in the "quarters" and is closely associated with the values of an agrarian community. Her first impulse when Jackson pulls up to her house is to pray and weep: "'Yes,' she said; 'I prayed. And, yes, He sent you back'" (25). Jackson is embarrassed by her

affection, and angered by her moral righteousness; she doesn't approve of his drinking beer, and is horrified and crushed that he no longer attends church or believes in God. Jackson becomes Aunt Charlotte's "burden," and it is only when a priest intervenes to counsel her, that Aunt Charlotte can forgive Jackson for his actions, love him unconditionally, and accept that he is leaving. In a moving passage, Gaines describes this faithful woman's aching heart with poignancy and compassion:

> "Reverend, I love my boy. That's all I want in this life, Reverend, to love him."
>
> . . . "You can't have him here with you, Sister Charlotte. He must go back."
>
> "And me?" she said.
>
> "You must continue the work." The tears ran down her face.
>
> "Continue? How long?"
>
> . . . "Until He calls," he said. . . . There ain't but a few of us left now, Sister Charlotte. Just a few of us left. The old ones leaving us every day, the young ain't joining to more. So it's left up to us. Us few to keep the lamp burning till He come back. More than ever before we must sacrifice--willing to give up everything for Him."
>
> . . . He touched her on the arm. Electricity ran through her as if the Lord Himself had touched her. She knew from then on her life would be only devoted to God.
>
> (180-181)

Aunt Charlotte is a solid, loving woman who is devoted to God; all of her actions are controlled by her beliefs. Her faith remains the only way that she can accept Jackson's decision to leave.

Jackson, meanwhile "could not remember the last time he went into a church" (66), and in reflecting on his life in San Francisco thinks "he found no help at home from his parents who were continually complaining about the conditions in which they lived, and neither did he find solace in the church as he had done when he lived in the South" (93-94). Thus faith in God, sustained by those who work his creation and see the abundance of natural miracles that take place in farming, is present in Aunt Charlotte, but markedly absent from Jackson. Aunt Charlotte's world is one where honor, hospitality, self-reliance, courage, and moral integrity thrive while Jackson does not possess any of these attributes.

Not surprisingly, the Carmier family, including Catherine and Raoul, are devoted Catholics; at the novel's end it this fact that in part keeps Catherine from eloping with Jackson. Symbolically, this tie to the church is represented in the moments before Jackson pulls Catherine into his car to go home and pack her clothes to leave:

> "Come, Catherine. Come."
>
> "No," she said, shaking her head angrily.
>
> "Come," he said. He grasped her arm now, and he was pulling her away from the church. "Come."
>
> "No," she said desperately. She was trying to hold onto the church now. "No."

> "Please," she said. She was not angry now, she was frightened. "Please, please,"' she said. But he would not stop pulling her. (223)

When Catherine considers running away with Jackson, she realizes: "No, I will not be happy. To be happy, one must work and believe. He does not believe. No, he won't be happy, and I won't be happy either" (231-232). Gaines's novel here speaks a piece of truth that the Agrarians also emphasize. Human love is not sustaining; it must be combined with faith in God and hard work. In the novel's end, Jackson is the lost soul while Catherine has recognized one of life's truths. In the final scene, Catherine chooses to stay at home with the future uncertain, while Jackson "stood there, hoping that Catherine would come back outside. But she never did" (248).

Catherine Carmier's conclusion reiterates agrarian themes of work, family, faith, and love that are woven throughout the novel. Sympathy goes out to Jackson for his abhorrence of the racism that still exists between blacks, Cajuns, and whites in the plantation community. Nevertheless, Jackson is clearly not yet a man worthy of marrying Catherine until he can grasp a greater meaning of truth, and recognize the value of love and faith to sustain us when burdens like racism make anger and isolation a way of life.

The search for understanding the way in which the human condition tolerates the unwritten code of slavery, racial inequalities, and class distinction in the deep South during the 1940's, is the subject of Gaines's 1967 novel Of Love and Dust. This "code" is best summed up by the auspicious Cajun, Sidney Bonbon, near the novel's end when he says to the novel's narrator Jim Kelly: "Me and you--

what we is? We little people, Geam. They make us do what they want us to do, and they don't tell us nothing. We don't have nothing to say 'bout it, do we, Geam?" (258). The story's action revolves around a central character, Marcus, an angry eighteen-year-old who killed a man in a honkey-tonk fight and is bonded out of jail to work on the Hebert plantation. To seek revenge against Sidney Bonbon, the Cajun plantation overseer who nearly works him to death, and whose mistress Marcus is unable to win over, Marcus begins an affair with Bonbon's wife Louise. By seducing Louise, Marcus violently challenges the "code" of the Hebert plantation, and his provocation provides tragic humor, conflict, and a climactic ending to the novel.

Underlying agrarian themes threaded through the novel appear in the descriptions of community life in the quarters; the rage and hostility Marcus embodies when he comes from the city juxtaposed with the willingness of Jim Kelly, the black tractor driver, to try to help him; and the search for courage to stand up to the "code" in a time when racial abuse was a way of life for blacks in Jim and Marcus's situation.

The novel is set in 1948 on the sugar cane plantation of Marshall Hebert. Unlike Catherine Carmier, Gaines has black characters working on the plantation for Hebert, as well as sharecropping. As a result, more animosity is felt toward the task of working in the fields, and the tractor plays a large role in production. Narrator Jim Kelly reveals the farming system early on in the novel:

> I put Red Hannah in gear and started out for the field. The whole quarter was up now. The people who didn't have to go into the field for Marshall Hebert were getting

> ready to go out into their own little patches. . . . The plantation (or what was left of the plantation now) had all its crop far back in the field. The front land was for the sharecroppers. The Cajuns had the front-est and best land, and the colored people (those who were still hanging on) had the middle and worst land. The plantation land was farther back still, almost to the swamps. (26)

While work is hard, life within the quarters of the Hebert plantation is vibrant. Older members of the community include Aunt Ca'line and her husband Pa Bully, Uncle Octave and Aunt Margaret, Louise's housekeeper who watches over Louise and Bonbon's daughter, Tite. Like Aunt Charlotte in <u>Catherine Carmier</u>, these older individuals help strengthen their communities by providing stern advice and sometimes admonition to younger folks. Aunt Margaret warns Marcus and Louise of trouble when their affair begins and does everything she can to prevent it; a committed Christian woman who won't put up with what is happening, she makes her feelings clear to Jim in the following passage which offers a glimpse of her personality:

> "My hand," she said, looking at the hand that wasn't holding Tite. "My hand. All they done done all they life was housework and clean baby mess--'cepting little fishing now and then; now I'm old, they got to protect the world." She looked at Marcus. "Black trash," she said quietly. She looked at me. "Sometimes I think the Master must be 'sleep." (139)

Similarly, Miss Julie Rand, Marcus's "nan-nan" (a term used to describe a mother figure or godmother), although forced to live in Baton Rouge with her children because she is an old woman, takes the values of the quarters community with her. She is a God-fearing woman who nurtures her children and Marcus with love and nourishes them with her cooking. She raises Marcus when his mother dies and his father abandons him. She visits Marcus in jail bringing food and requested cigarettes, and even convinces Marshall Hebert to bond Marcus, because she knows Hebert is guilty of getting Bonbon to kill two men many years earlier. Indeed, "protecting the world" is a typical endeavor for the older people in Gaines's quarters, and Aunt Margaret and Miss Julie Rand's courage and determination echo Gaines's descriptions of his own Aunt Augusteen Jefferson and Aunt Charlotte in <u>Catherine Carmier</u>.

Younger men and women within the quarters include Jim's friends Burl and Snuke, whom he drinks and plays cards with, and Jobbo, a harmonica player who joins Jim in his guitar strumming. The social life in the quarters revolves around porch talk and weekend "house fairs" which are held in two places, as Jim exclaims:

> The quarter has two house fairs every Saturday night. Mrs. Laura Mae gives one up the quarter and Josie Henderson gives one down the quarter. Mrs. Laura Mae's fair is quiet and orderly. She doesn't have any music, and only good people--usually Christians--go there. Her food is better than Josie's food--her pralines, her cookies, her gumbo--and I think she even gives you more for your money. Still, most people go to Josie's fair because

> Josie's got music. She's even got an old loud-speaker hung up on the gallery so you can hear the music all over the plantation. Josie's got another room for gambling, and still another room with a bed for--well, you can guess for what. (88)

Although the members of the quarters community work hard and are paid very little, the description of the house fairs indicates that no one is poverty stricken and they do have a good time. There is a sense of place and the characters appear part of an interlocking family unit although they are not all related. Andrew Lytle's premise that "family is of utmost importance" holds true here. In contrast is Marcus's lack of a father or mother. Their absence is one clue to Marcus's character and his hostility toward those in the quarters when he arrives.

From the beginning of the novel, when Marcus tells Jim, "I killed somebody" (6), there are clear indications that Marcus is rebellious. Critic Valerie Babb comments that the "rare mention of his last name indicates that he is a loner with no familial or cultural ties and no regard for family, elders, or community" (66). Marcus is raised in the nearby city Baton Rouge; his mother dies when he is twelve and his father "took off somewhere" (248), abandoning him to live with Miss Julie Rand.

When Jim Kelly takes Marcus to fetch his clothes from Miss Julie's home in Baton Rouge, this industrial city is given the following description by Jim:

> A half hour later I was crossing the Mississippi River into Baton Rouge. I could smell the strong odor from the

> cement plant down below the bridge. Sometimes the odor was so strong it nearly made you sick. Farther to the right were the chemical plants and oil companies. I could see hundreds and hundreds of electric lights over there. High above all the lights and buildings and oil tanks was a big blaze of fire. The fire came from a flame stick burning wasted gas. (7)

How different a setting Gaines chooses to describe a place just a few hours from the earthy smells of the country, landscapes of corn fields and pecan trees, and stars overhead to brighten the night. Marcus arrives to pick up his things, but "he didn't have any kindness or respect in his voice" (9) toward Miss Julie Rand or her grown children. Later in the novel, we learn that until he was twelve, Marcus was "a good little Christian" (249), but it is at this time he gets his first taste of city living when his white boss at a parking lot refuses to prevent him from being blackmailed by Big Red, an older black boy. Marcus refuses to be a tool for Big Red and the next day when Big Red comes to collect his money, Marcus smashes him over the head with a bottle of soda pop and is consequently sent off to jail.

These childhood episodes depict Marcus as city-bred boy abandoned by his family and handed cruel injustice by both blacks and whites during formative years. He chooses to lash out by hitting Big Red and, later in the story, Murphy Bacheron; he does so without caring about the consequences of his actions. By the time he reaches the plantation he has killed a man and is both fearless, and vengeful. His youth promotes his fearlessness while at the same time allowing him to disregard the wisdom of older folks like Miss Julie Rand. Also,

Marcus does not grow close to anyone; nor does he trust those within the quarters community. In his efforts to build an emotional wall around his heart, Marcus becomes hardened and belligerent towards those who try to befriend him, especially Jim.

Clothes-conscious and materialistic, Marcus's nickname becomes "Playboy" for wearing white sharkskin suits and dress clothes in the field. When Jim offers Marcus a set of work clothes, Marcus refuses, saying, "I'll never put that convict shirt on my back. . . . I'm used to silk" (31). In a revealing passage near the end of the novel we see Marcus's full belief that he must stand on his own and not let himself become a member of the quarters community. He argues with Jim:

> "When they let me out of jail, I promised myself I was go'n look out only for myself; and I wasn't go'n expect no more from life than what I could do for myself. And nobody in this world need to expect no more from me than that."
>
> "You can't make it like that, Marcus," I said. "They got the world fixed where you have to work with other people."
>
> "Not me," he said.
>
> "Yes, you, Marcus," I said. "Yes, you. You, me and everybody else."
>
> "Not me," he said. "'Cause I already know 'em. No matter what they say, it don't add up to nothing but a big pile of shit. You do what you can for yourself, and that's all." (253)

Marcus is the product of a fatherless, industrial world where the "sensibility in human affairs" such as "manners, hospitality, sympathy, family life, and romantic love" (Davidson xxv) have never had the chance to develop.

Marcus' faith in himself clashes with the setting of the quarters, where most people attend church and have faith in God and their community. Aunt Margaret's faith is especially strong, and Jim describes her reaction to the fear that Bonbon will catch Marcus and Louise: "Aunt Margaret was probably scared . . . but she had extra strength to keep her going--extra strength she got from believing in God" (222). It is only at the novel's end when Marcus is adored and worshipped by Bonbon's wife Louise, that love is able to melt his hardened heart. Then of course it is too late, and as the two plan an escape to the North in Hebert's car they are betrayed by Hebert and Marcus is slain by Bonbon.

Unfortunately, even in an agrarian setting, the horrendous racial code still existing on the Hebert plantation made it impossible for Marcus and Louise to escape: "Marshall was too big . . . he was the law. He was police, he was judge, he was jury" (198). Nevertheless, the community of faithful people within the quarters comes to love and respect Marcus for his courage, and in the end the bad boy from Baton Rouge loves Louise and is grateful for Jim's friendship.

Of Love and Dust exposes the most horrid forms of racism and intolerance occurring on plantations during the 1940's, and it is easy to see why there is little hope or incentive for living in such a world. However, after seeing the despair and anger that Marcus brings to

the plantation community, there is a greater sense of appreciation for the endurance and cheerful courage that those within the quarters radiate despite the burden of being treated as lesser human beings. Comfort arises from the taste of Aunt Margaret's pies and the music of Jim's guitar. The strength of a God-fearing, tightly knit community bearing their burden together leaves readers admiring the people of the quarters. Remarkaby, when battling racism, these kindred spirits are able to grasp the truth of faith, love, and loyalty to friends and family, while at the same time maintaining a sense of humor in the face of adversity.

In Bloodline (1968), there are two stories, "A Long Day in November" and "Just Like a Tree," which examine with humor and sadness what happens when life in the community of the quarters must finally confront the changes brought about by technology and industrialization.

Set around the late 1930's or early 1940's, "A Long Day in November" is a tender tale narrated by Sonny, the six-year-old son of Eddie and Amy Howard, who both live and work in the quarters of a sugar cane plantation. The story begins when Sonny is awakened late in the night by Mama and told to go outside and use the bathroom. Mama then tells him, "Tomorrow morning when you get up me and you leaving here, hear?" (6). The long day begins when Sonny awakes the next morning and hears Mama and Daddy fussing over the car breaking down and Daddy coming in late. "You love your car. Go let it love you back," Amy tells Eddie, and with that she and Sonny take off for "Gran'mon" and Uncle Al's house. "Mama, I'm just tired of Eddie running up and down the road in that car" (17);

"he changed after he got that car" (20), Amy tells Gran'mon when she arrives. Like Of Love and Dust's Aunt Margaret, Gran'mon is very protective and even goes so far as to shoot her gun in the air when Eddie comes to the house to try and persuade Amy and Sonny to come home. "She's my daughter and if she ain't got sense enough to look out for herself, I have," (31) Gran'mon proclaims.

The story's action centers on Eddie's attempt to win Amy back, and his eventual trip with Sonny to see Madame Toussaint, a Voodoo fortune teller in the quarters who gives advice for the right price. The car in "A Long Day in November" is a symbol of the industrial changes being ushered in with time which affect the lives of those in the quarters. Eddie's change is a result of the long hours he spends in the car heading to Baton Rouge and elsewhere, rather than staying at home with his family; when Amy can take no more, she leaves him and is quick to proclaim Eddie's love of the car as the problem.

Eddie works hard to come up with three dollars for advice--he has seventy-five cents and manages to borrow the rest; he hands it over, and Madame Toussaint says sternly, "go set fire to your car" (59). When Amy tells him, "If you burn it up, yes, I'll come back" (65), Eddie is left with no choice but to follow the advice. Eddie does want his family back, and in a humorous ending to the story, all the people in the quarters including Amy, Sonny, and Gran'mon, gather out near the sugar house for a "car-burning" party. "I do declare, . . . I must be dreaming. He's a man after all" (71), says Gran'mon as the car goes up in flames. Amy and Sonny go back home as promised, and the long day comes to an end. Sonny prays before his father and

then gets into his warm bed, a symbol of the security he feels knowing his mama and daddy are together once again.

The symbolic use of the car as the machine which pulls Eddie away from his family indicates Gaines's recognition that machines like the tractor and the car imposed threats to an agrarian way of life. The struggle for material possessions depicted in "A Long Day in November" is a literary revelation of the same themes the Vanderbilt Agrarians sought to expose through the metaphor of the individual in modern society in I'll Take My Stand. Wise Madame Toussaint knows that burning the car is the only way Eddie can win Amy back, and she is right. The story also shows a close community whose members watch out for each other in times of trouble, and are faithful to God. Indeed, the importance of prayer in the lives of the Howard family is just one more reminder of the values ingrained in the sharecroppers of rural Louisiana; these values shape the characters of "A Long Day in November" and bring truth and meaning to Gaines's work.

"Just Like A Tree" is the most memorable story in the Bloodline collection. According to biographer Anne Simpson, "Gaines has said that 'Just Like A Tree' is possibly his favorite of the stories and has read from it on numerous occasions" (225). Interestingly, it was then Sewanee Review editor Andrew Lytle who first saw promise in "Just Like A Tree" and published the story in the Sewanee Review, (Autumn, 1963). The story is divided into ten sections, each with a different narrator; it details a gathering of friends and families who have come together to give their respect and farewells to the

matriarch of the quarters community, Aunt Fe, who is about to be taken up north by her niece Louise and Louise's husband James.

With prose that pulls the reader into the life of each character, the story begins from the perspective of five-year-old Chuckkie on the way to Aunt Fe's in a mule-driven cart with his parents, Emile and Leola, and his Gran'mon. Chuckkie describes Emile fussing with the mule, Mr. Bascom, and tells us that Gran'mon sitting in a chair in the back of the wagon "had been saying 'poor soul, poor soul,' ever since she heard Aunt Fe was go'n leave . . . " (223). When they arrive at last and walk up the steps and through the door, Leola's narration reveals her family's feelings about Aunt Fe leaving:

> Sitting over there by that fireplace, trying to look joyful when ever'body there know she ain't. But she trying, you know; smiling and bowing when people say something to her. How can she be joyful, I ask you; how can she be? Poor thing, she been here all her life--or most of it, let's say. 'Fore they moved in this house, they lived in one back in the woods 'bout a mile from here. . . . I know ever since I been big enough to know people I been seeing her right here. . . . 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. (227)

"Louise, moving her from here's like moving a tree you been used to in your front yard all your life," pleads Leola (227). Leola asks Louise if there is any other way, but Louise says no: "Ya'll ain't no kin to Auntie. She go with me" (228). There is a strong sense of the loyalty, devotion, and love that Leola and all others gathered at Aunt

Fe's house feel for the ancient woman. She is a part of life in the quarters as they all know it. Many people including Leola and Emile offer to take Aunt Fe into their homes, and for years have been looking after her laundry and helping her with food. She is a proud woman, however, and has resisted moving until now.

James's perspective on the gathering at Aunt Fe's house reveals his indifference to the blessings of community life. James sees the people of the quarters as naive country folks: "Man, like these cats are primitive--goodness. You know what I mean? I mean like wood stoves. Don't mention TV, man, these cats here never heard of that" (230). James also thinks of himself as a stud, while he adds plenty of "Mr. Harper" (a taste probably akin to Mr. Beam) to his eggnog. He calls Louise "Baby," and his description of the gathering to honor Aunt Fe is marked with tragic humor:

> I go to the door with Mr. Harper under my arm and the cup in my hand and I look out into the front room where they all are. I mean, there's about ninety-nine of them in there. Old ones, young ones, little ones, big ones, yellow ones, black ones, brown ones--you name them, brother, and they were there. And what for? Brother, I'll tell you what for. Just because me and Baby are taking this old chick out of these sticks. (231)

The importance of family and friends in a rural community is overlooked and even ridiculed by James. He has no respect for the "old chick" Aunt Fe, who would have whipped him had she known he was saying such a thing. The paragraph also indicates that the quarters had no TV. Without television more leisure time is spent

sharing porch talk, visiting, and storytelling with old and young. There is tremendous importance and value attached to the porch talk tradition, as it builds and connects people's relationships to one another through constant communication; television doesn't talk back and tends to promote isolation.

The overriding simile flowing through the story is best understood during Aunt Clo's monologue which describes Aunt Fe "just like a tree." The inviolable nature of Aunt Fe resonates out of Aunt Clo's words:

> Be just like wrapping a chain round a tree and jecking and jecking, and then shifting the chain little bit and jecking and jecking some in that direction, and then shifting it some mo' and jecking and jecking in that direction. . . . Still 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. . . . Then you hear the roots crying, and then you keep on jecking, and then it give, and then it falls. (236)

Aunt Clo then states that two holes will be left--one big hole in the ground, and one hole in the air where the lovely branches have been for so many years--"two holes you can't ever fill no matter how hard you try," she concludes (236). In the end, the person pulling up the tree will drag it all the way to the North, where, according to Aunt Clo,

> She kind o' stand in the way no matter where you set her. So finally, sir, you say "I just stand her up here a little while and see, and if it don't work out, if she keep

> getting in the way, I guess we'll just have to take her to the dump." (237)

Aunt Clo's analogy imparts meaning to why Aunt Fe's leaving is so monumental. First, like the tree, Aunt Fe is a part of the landscape of the quarters who is determined to keep her place until death. She belongs where she is, and her removal by James and Louise will leave a void in the community that can never be replaced. Ironically, it is the tractor--a product of the Machine Age--that is used to move the tree in Aunt Clo's simile; it is not unlike the car which will be used to take Aunt Fe away. The dumping of the tree because it has no use or value to the observer is the final revelation Aunt Clo's words bring to Aunt Fe's predicament. Finally, for James and Louise, Aunt Fe is a burden instead of a treasure. In the quarters her presence is more precious than gold to the ninety-nine who have tearfully gathered to tell her good-bye. Aunt Clo and others recognize that Aunt Fe won't be treated with the same kind of love or respect when she leaves.

In the final narration, Aunt Lou, Chuckkie's Gran'mon, and Aunt Fe's friend, loyally stays the night, telling Leola, "I'm staying right here till Fe leave that house. . . . I been knowing her for the past fifty some years now, and I ain't 'bout to leave her on her last night here" (247). Aunt Lou helps Aunt Fe get ready for bed, and the two sing the Termination song together. Aunt Fe prays for a long time, and softly cries before Lou touches her and feels a long shaking all over her body; then, "she eased back on the bed--calm, calm, calm." "Sleep on, Fe," says Aunt Lou. "When you get up there tell 'em all I ain't far behind" (249).

There is no fear, no anger, and no sadness in these moments. Aunt Fe has died in her place, and Aunt Lou looks to the day when she, too, will go to meet her Maker. These women of faith are the standing strength of the plantation community, and like ancient oak trees with long tap roots and extended limbs, their presence looms over all of the younger men and women of the quarters. How differently James and Louise looked upon Aunt Fe! Yet, had they been raised in the quarters environment, they, too might have respected their elders and learned from them. Agrarian societies promoted the respect and love of the elderly that Gaines preserves for today's readers through "Just Like A Tree." His ending moves to tears anyone who has also been taught to respect the old and wise of this world.

Gaines's 1973 novel, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, presents a larger-than-life manifestation of strength in the character of Miss Jane Pittman. Carrying on the traditions of Aunt Charlotte, Aunt Margaret, Miss Julie Rand, and Aunt Fe, Jane Pittman is a 110-year-old woman who narrates stories of her life to Gaines's fictional editor. Miss Jane lives through slavery, the Reconstruction period of the South, and, before she dies, the early parts of the Civil Rights movement. The land and its importance to Miss Jane Pittman are apparent in several passages in Books I and II, but it is not until Books III and IV that agrarian themes are their strongest.

Miss Jane's pride in working the land is first seen in Book I, after the Civil War, when she talks her way into a job from Mr. Bone, the overseer of Colonel Dye's plantation. She's only eleven or twelve, but she compares herself to the other women, saying, "I

could do [as] much work as any of them" (61), and proves it by getting a pay raise equal to the older working women. In Book II her self-sufficiency and determination show themselves in a short passage explaining one of Miss Jane's philosophies about life:

> Fish and work. Hard work can kill you, but plain steady work never killed nobody. Steady work and eating plenty fish never killed nobody. Greens good, too. Fish and greens and good steady work. Plenty walking, that's good. People don't walk no more. (102)

Miss Jane raises greens in her own garden and fishes for herself and others. These hobbies allow her to remain independent and self-sufficient, qualities which foster in her confidence and individuality.

Book III takes place at the Samson plantation, where Jane is in her fifties but still insists on working in the fields. One cold December day, Paul Samson approaches Miss Jane in the field to ask her what she knows about cooking for white people. "I like it right where I am, if you don't mind" Jane replies (140). "On Samson, you like what Paul Samson like," replies Paul, explaining that if Jane chooses not to work in the house she must look for another job. And so she goes to work as the Samson cook, telling us "after I was up there awhile I didn't mind it at all. . . . I had other people to help me do the work, and I had all the free time I wanted to fish and work in my garden" (140). Gardening in the quarters is often mentioned in Gaines's novels as a pleasant but important responsibility that old and young enjoy, and Miss Jane is no exception. Symbolically it also adheres to the agrarian philosophy of working the land, thereby

increasing self-sufficiency, and growing closer to God by watching the miracles of seeds and soil, sun and rain.

Before her move from the field to the house, Jane also finds religion. It happens after many days of praying that God will take hold of her heart. In a touching passage, she reveals what happens one Thursday morning:

> I won't ever forget it as long as I live--I was on my way in the field when it hit me. Looked like a big load just fell off my shoulders.
>
> "Grace," I said. She was walking little bit ahead of me. "Grace, I got it."
>
> "At last," she said. "At last. Jane, how do you feel? You feel light?
>
> "I feel light," I said. "Look like I can fly." (136)

Jane goes on to describe the vision she has of seeing God, dropping a load of bricks from around her shoulders, and crossing a river to meet her husband Joe, son Ned, and her Savior. Her epiphany takes place in the fields, not in the house as cook, or in the nearby town of Bayonne. That night and for the rest of her life, Miss Jane joins her friend Grace Turner and so many of the other members of the quarters in the evening worship services held outdoors. Their singing voices ring out all over the quarters, and now instead of listening from her porch, Miss Jane chimes in.

Titled "The Quarters," Book IV takes place in the 1950's and early 1960's, and details Jane's last years on the Samson plantation. The plantation is changing, and when Tee Bob--the young man

destined to inherit the land--dies, Miss Jane tells what happens to Samson:

> Robert chopped the place up in small patches and called in the people. First, he called in the Cajuns off the river and gived them what they wanted. Then he called in the colored out the quarters and gived them what was left. Some of them got a good piece of land to work, but most of them got land near the swamps, and it growed nothing but weeds, and sometimes not even that. So the colored people gived up and started moving away. . . . The Cajuns, on the other hand, was getting more and more all the time. And the more they got, the better plows and tractors they got. . . . After a while they wanted more land. (206)

Miss Jane describes Robert tearing down abandoned houses in the quarters, and letting Cajuns plow fields near them until corn and cane came up. "But now just a few of us left," declares Miss Jane, "Now nothing but fields, fields, and more fields. They don't have the nerve to kick the rest of us off, so they just wait for us to move away or die" (207). The hope for independent farming is snuffed out for the blacks in the quarters, and so is their sense of place and livelihood. It is clear that the blacks want to farm but aren't able to compete with the Cajuns and their tractors. Gaines shows the appropriate tension the blacks feel toward the dominance of the tractor, a machine that takes money to run, and has no preference of owners. The Cajuns and their tractors leave in their wake generations of black farmers with no land to till.

One of those affected by the prospect of no life working the land is Jimmy, the "One" who will organize blacks to protest for civil rights. Jimmy had "No daddy, and soon will be no mama, because mama was go'n leave for the city to work like all the other young people was doing." The boy is raised in the quarters by his great-aunt Lena, and becomes like a grandson to Miss Jane. He eventually goes to college, and even law school before coming back to the plantation to organize a protest in Bayonne. He wants Miss Jane's help, and a revealing conversation between the two occurs shortly before Jimmy's assassination and Jane's triumphant decision to defy Robert Samson and lead the march to Bayonne:

> "I don't go to church no more," Jimmy said, "because I lost faith in God. And even now I don't feel I'm worthy standing here before y'all. I don't feel worthy because I'm so weak. And I'm here because you are strong. . . . Some have money, but we don't have a cent. We have just the strength of our people, our Christian people."
> (224-225)

It is the strength of the old people like Miss Jane that pushes the march forward when the book comes to an end. The values incurred by those that have worked the land for so many generations are steadfast and dependable. Those that have lived on the land are strong while others like Jimmy are weak; their spirits have been tainted and weakened by the life of the city. Before his death Jimmy recognizes the solid beliefs in truth and righteousness that his people hold, and he comes home for help where he knows he can count on friends and family. The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is a

powerful, moving testimony to the life of one woman determined to remain strong through hard work, faith, and friendship. Despite the adversities of slavery, racism, and the deaths of loved ones, her spirit is never broken.

A Gathering of Old Men (1983) explores the lives of seventeen aged black men that have lived on the Marshall plantation their entire lives--seventy and eighty and ninety years. The novel is set in the 1970's; it opens with the old men who have gathered at the home of old Mathu, "the only one we knowed had ever stood up" (31). Mathu is accused of shooting Beau Boutan, a Cajun farmer who leased all of the Marshall land and was notorious for his abusive actions toward blacks. Part of the "Fix" Boutan clan, Beau stands for many of the injustices suffered by all of the old black men who claim to have shot him. Included in the story is Candy, the twenty-five-year-old niece of Major Marshall and his sister Bea. Candy is fiercely protective of Mathu, a father-figure who has raised her to know the people of the quarters; Candy even claims that she killed Boutan. Sheriff Mapes and his deputy, Griffin, arrive at Mathu's to find Beau lying dead on the grass in the front yard. Through various forms of questioning, Mapes seeks confessions from those who say they murdered Boutan.

The novel's themes center on revenge, remorse over the changes that have been ushered in on the plantation since the 1950's, and a sense of loss felt by the old men over the abuse inflicted on them by Cajuns in particular. The old men together present a vastly different perspective from Miss Jane's outlook in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. The combination of the old

men's pride over their past ability to work the land and bitterness at the Cajun farmers' takeover is a source of long-standing tension which has resulted in Beau Boutan's death. In a 1988 interview with Carl Wooten and Marcia Gaudet regarding the men of A Gathering of Old Men, Gaines points out the differences between black women and men on the plantation:

> . . . the women in their work did not come in conflict with the outer world as much as the men did in their work. The men competed with the white man and there would be conflicts there. The black man competed with the white man as sharecropper and when he went into town, whereas the black women seldom competed. (232)

The competition between the Cajuns and blacks didn't last for long. By the 1970's in A Gathering of Old Men, the blacks on the Marshall Plantation have no land of their own to lease and their children and grandchildren have no choice but to leave the place. The old men's lamentation over no longer being able to work the land of their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers reminds us of the way in which the land shaped those who worked it. On the way to Mathu's early on in the story, one of the old men, Cherry, remarks:

> Beau and his family had been leasing all the land the past twenty-five, thirty years. The very same land we had worked, our people had worked, our people's people had worked since the time of slavery. Now Mr. Beau had it all. Or, I should say, he had it all up to about twelve o'clock that day. (43)

Weeds covering the quarters everywhere--next to houses, under pecan trees, and on top of graves--is the first symbol Gaines uses to show the dilapidation and deterioration of the Marshall place. Sheriff Mapes arrives amidst high weeds and questions each of the men, demanding to know why each man says he killed Boutan. Many men tell stories that reveal years of mental and physical anguish inflicted by Cajuns. Johnny Paul's confession of Beau's murder is a dramatic soliloquy recalling the community life in the quarters before the blacks were forced off of the land; agrarian themes pour forth in his recollections of family time and work in the fields:

> "Remember?" he said. "When they wasn't no weeds--remember? Remember how they used to sit out there on the garry--Mama, Papa, Aunt Clara, Aunt Sarah, Unc Moon, Aunt Spoodle, Aunt Thread. Remember? Everybody had flowers in the yard." (90)

Johnny Paul's words express the longing he feels for the days when he worked the place. His pride in his accomplishments is also evident:

> "Remember Jack and Red Rider hitting that field every morning with them two mules, Diamond and Job?" . . . "Lord, Lord, Lord. Don't tell me you can't remember them early mornings when that sun was just coming up over there behind them trees? Ya'll can't tell me ya'll can't remember how Jack and Red Rider used to race out into that field on them old single slides? . . . Hah. Tell me

> who could beat them two men plowing a row, hanh? Who?" (91)

Of his fellow workers in the fields, Johnny Paul remembers: "We stuck together, shared what little we had, and loved and respected each other" (92). With lamentation over what once was a prosperous community of farmers, friends, and animals, Johnny Paul grieves for what was lost in the quarters and in his own life when the Marshall land was taken over by Cajuns. No more do multitudes of families gather to work, visit together in the evenings, and worship together. Johnny Paul wants to make sure the memories of his people survive even if their way of life has not. Confessing to Boutan's murder, Johnny Paul concludes:

> "I did it 'cause that tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard, and I was scared if I didn't do it, one day that tractor was go'n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that we ever was. . . . Mama and Papa worked too hard in these fields. . . . They mama and they papa people worked too hard. . . " (92)

Johnny Paul's two soliloquies touch on a sore subject for most of the old men present: the tractor's contribution to their loss of pride and land, and the conflict in the past between the black man's mule and the Cajun tractor. This conflict is a controlling theme throughout the novel; it comes to a head when Tucker, another confessor gathered at Mathu's, pathetically recounts the tragic tale of the mule/tractor competition that his brother Silas fell prey to decades earlier. Silas was "the last one to fight against the tractor," recalls Tucker. Silas worked his wife so hard trying to maintain their

sharecropping land that he drove her crazy. One day while Silas worked his two small mules, "they could hear the machine like everybody else could hear the machine, and they knowed they had to pull, pull, pull if they wanted to keep going" (96). Significantly, "machine," not tractor, is the word used to describe the force that Silas was working so hard to defeat in the face-off. The mules "pulled for him, sweating, slipping, falling" just as Silas, like his brothers before him, ferociously struggled in order to retain his livelihood on the land in the face of the Cajuns.

Miraculously, on that day, Silas and his mules beat Felix Boutan on his tractor and many saw the race. Tucker remembers: "But they wasn't supposed to win. How can flesh and blood and nigger win against white man and machine?" (96). In their rage, Felix and the other humiliated Cajuns beat Silas to death with sticks of sugar cane, as Tucker and the rest of the blacks in the field stood idle from fear. "How can a man beat a machine?" Tucker screams (96). "Forgive me!". . . "Can you hear me Silas? Tell me can you hear me, Silas?"

Tucker's wife then leads Tucker back to Mathu's steps and for a moment all is silent. Even the noisy tractor, whose motor was ironically left running on the dirt road outside of Mathu's house after Boutan's murder, is silent now. Early on in the novel, Gaines uses the running tractor's noise to pierce the thoughts of those standing around Beau Boutan as he lies dead on Mathu's front lawn. By killing Beau Boutan, the men who have lost their land get revenge. There is a silencing of the machine only when Mapes arrives, and someone is sent to turn the engine off.

The symbolic retaliation against the tractor goes one step further a short while later: "Mat, Jacob, Ding, Bing, fire at that tractor" (199), cries Clatoo. The old men are involved in a shoot-out with Luke Will, a friend of the Boutan clan who gathers some of his Cajun comrades and goes to Mathu's place seeking revenge for Beau's death. Everyone with a gun hoots and hollers as they fire on the nameless tractor, until it is pockmarked with hits. The shooting is a symbolic gesture, but all of the old men clearly take pleasure in using for target practice the machine that on the Marshall plantation and all across the South simultaneously represented progress and loss.

The story concludes with the death of Charlie Biggs, a fifty-year-old black man who comes forward to confess he has shot Boutan in self-defense. The shoot-out doesn't protect Charlie from being hurt by Luke Will and his boys; in the crossfire Charlie is killed, but in the eyes of those witnessing the extraordinary confession he brings forth, Charlie is a hero because he stood up to Boutan. Mathu, although willing to accept the penalties for a crime he never committed, is allowed to go free when the episode is taken to court. Luke Will also loses his life in the shootings.

A Gathering of Old Men is a moving example of what life in the quarters gave to its people. The old men elevate without sentimentalizing their lives in the fields. They look back on their work and their parents' work with pride despite its hardship and the cruelties of whites and Cajuns. Still, they lament the usurpation of land by the Cajuns. Gaines recognizes the insecurities, the lack of self-sufficiency, and loss of pride that the inability to work their land

caused in the black men. A Gathering of Old Men allows each individual to be a man by putting his life on the line for Mathu and Charlie. Courage, strength, pride, love, and loyalty resonate out of these ancient people who at long last have stood up for each other, and the memories of their people's life on the land.

Conclusion

Gaines as Agrarian

> There is nothing in Gaines that is not open, to love or to interpretation. He also claims and revels in the rich heritage of Southern black people and their customs; the community he feels with them is unmistakable and goes deeper even than pride. . . . Gaines is mellow with historical reflection, supple with wit, relaxed and expansive, because he does not equate his people with failure.
>
> --Alice Walker, from The New York Times, May 1971.

Inspirational and absorbing, Ernest J. Gaines's work allows readers to experience the provincial lives of poor blacks who lived and died working the land of Southwest Louisiana during the 1930's, '40's, and '50's. Following in the footsteps of William Faulkner, Jean Toomer, Andrew Lytle, Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Conner, and others, Gaines's work explores universal truths in the lives of rural people. His characters inspire and move us to laughter and tears; their positive spirits shine through dark clouds of adversity, and in the words of Alice Walker, "Gaines does not equate his people with failure" (6).

The priorities and values derived from a people connected to the land are precisely what allows Gaines's characters to radiate strength and success--even though they must struggle beneath the wearisome burden of racism. An examination of Gaines's boyhood experiences in Chapter One authenticates his knowledge of life within

the plantation quarters. The Agrarian perspectives discussed in Chapter Two establish both the benefits and blessings received by those working the land. Chapter Three breaks down Gaines's novels and short stories for a closer look at the specific characteristics and motives of his people and their identification with an agrarian ideal.

Catherine Carmier (1964) explores the positive aspects of sharecropping and the importance of family and religion. Of Love and Dust (1967) describes the various aspects of community life within the quarters and reveals its importance as a place where friendship, love, and fellowship thrive. Juxtaposed against this way of life is the urbanite Marcus, who represents the corrosion of the soul that often takes place in the city. From Bloodline (1968), "A Long Day in November" warns of what happens when material possessions replace love of family, and "Just Like a Tree" describes the reverence and love that the quarters community bestows upon older men and women.

Similarly, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971) also centers on the strength of older people who have lived on the land. Hard work, faith in God, love of family and neighbors, and a sense of humor all thrive in the person of Miss Jane; by the novel's end she is a hero whose enduring spirit is never broken despite years as a slave and field worker. Finally, A Gathering of Old Men (1983) illuminates the qualities it takes to be a man--courage, honor, self-reliance, faith, integrity, and pride in a good day's work. The old men of the novel recount with pride their work in the fields and lament the loss of their own sharecropping land to the Cajuns and their tractors.

Undoubtedly, Ernest Gaines would agree with the Agrarians' "feeling of intense disgust with the spiritual disorder of modern life--its destruction of human integrity and its lack of purpose" (Davidson 314). By going back to a place and time when hard work, faith in a Creator, honesty, and kindness to one's fellow man were practiced daily, Gaines teaches his readers the secret of an abundant life. His characters carry the scars of racism but this does not crush their spirits or their abilities to distinguish right from wrong and good from bad. They are blessed with the love of friends and neighbors, a sense of place, faith, and humor: all enable them to pull through hard times with cheerful courage and an appreciation of life's blessings.

To read Ernest Gaines's novels and stories today is to be reminded about what is important in life. Gaines's parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents lived simple, virtuous, productive, and at times tragic lives, while under the burden of racial injustice. In a May, 1993, interview with critic David Streitfeld Gaines said of his work,

> "I'm still trying to write letters--not only for the people I knew, but for the ones who died long before I was born. They didn't keep diaries, they didn't keep journals, they couldn't write letters. So what I'm trying to do is imagine how they must have felt." (15)

Indeed, Gaines's characters celebrate the struggles and triumphs of his ancestors by giving readers a glimpse of Southern history based on his people's experiences. Readers "smell that Louisiana earth, feel that Louisiana sun, sit under the shade of one of

those Louisiana oaks, search for pecans in that Louisiana grass in one of those Louisiana yards next to one of those Louisiana bayous, not far from a Louisiana river" (Simpson 28). An agrarian way of life--its burdens and its blessings--is celebrated and preserved forever in Gaines's endearing testimonies; hearts are touched along the way.

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