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New Narratives of Southern Manhood: Race, Masculinity, and Closure in Ernest Gaines's Fiction

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In Memory of Herbert Lee Blount

In *A Rage For Order: Black/White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*, Joel Williamson explores the conjuncture of race, manhood, and violence peculiar to the American South. He argues that for southern white men the traditional Victorian masculine role of provider and protector was directly linked with violence because of plantation society's 'necessity of controlling a potentially explosive black population.' As early as the seventeenth century, a patrol system, made up of masters and overseers, enforced the laws of slavery. By the nineteenth century, the duty of patrolling was extended to all white men, who had authority over all blacks (even free blacks) and over whites who conspired with blacks. Thus a system for controlling slaves became a practice 'of all whites controlling all blacks ... a matter of race.' The martial role white men created for themselves became entrenched, particularly in the last decades before the Civil War as slavery came under attack by northerners from without and by rebellious slaves from within. Whites created a complementary stereotype of black people as 'simple, docile, and manageable' who if properly handled were like children, but if improperly cared for became animals. Williamson argues that this 'Sambo' figure was a figment of white wishful thinking, which functioned 'to build white egos' while masking their fears of black rebellion. Many black people played the Sambo role in order to survive slavery and its aftermath: 'Downcast eyes, shuffling feet, soft uncertain words, and a totally pliant manner were white-invented signals to

be used by a black person to say that this individual was no threat.' Williamson believes that the Sambo role saved not only blacks from white hostility but whites themselves 'from the wild and murderous behavior that did damage to their flattering image of themselves as protecting parents to these childlike people.'[1] The convergence of conventional Victorian gender ideology with southern racial ideology operated to make black males boys and white males men. Slavery and segregation fostered stereotypes and kept white people ignorant of black people. In Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) the white characters are surprised when the black men do not act 'like frightened little bedbugs.'[2] In Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), white lawyers argue that the falsely accused black defendant is not a man, but an 'animal.'[3]

In his fiction Ernest Gaines is interested not only in deconstructing stereotypes but also in presenting new models of southern manhood, for both black and white men. While Gaines has employed traditional definitions of manhood in his fiction, the vision he presents in his most recent novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*, is similar to that of Cooper Thompson and other contemporary theorists of masculinity, who believe that young men must learn 'traditional masculinity is life threatening' and that being men in a modern world means accepting their vulnerability, expressing a range of emotions, asking for help and support, learning non-violent means of resolving conflicts, and accepting behaviours which have traditionally been labelled feminine (such as being nurturing, communicative, and cooperative) as necessary for full human development.[4]

Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), set in the late 1970s in rural Louisiana, seems to have two definitions of manhood, one for young southern white men and one for old southern black men – a difference based on the social construction of race and masculinity and the history of race relations in the South. Gaines structures his novel with parallel maturation scenes that involve white and black men coming to terms with southern society's race and gender ideology. A young white man comes to maturity when he rejects his society's equation of masculinity with violence, while the old black men become men when they enact this definition. The young white man Gil attempts to break the cycle of racial violence that his father is known for by refusing to join his family in avenging his brother's death, allegedly at the hands of a black man. The old black men break

a cycle of paralysing fear which has led to passivity by responding, first verbally but then violently, to the attempt of white men to wield power over them. In doing so, while they do not provoke the racial conflict, they do not end it as soon as they could have. Ernest Gaines allows the old men briefly to wield power over whites, perhaps as revenge for having been at the mercy of whites in the past, perhaps as the only message racist white men, like Luke Will who instigates the shootout, can understand. These two definitions of what it means to be a man lead to an ideologically contradictory, though emotionally satisfying, double ending. This ending – first a shootout and then a trial banning guns – seems to be determined as much or more by literary conventions than by ideological considerations. As a result, *A Gathering of Old Men*, while reconstructing race relations and reversing historically southern social constructions of black and white manhood, does not go as far in questioning traditional definitions of masculinity and writing new masculine endings as does Gaines' most recent novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*. The model of manhood that Gaines confers on his young black male characters in a *A Lesson Before Dying* converges with Gil's. With these two portraits Gaines suggests that in order to reconstruct the South, both black and white men must reject the traditional western model of manhood that links masculinity and violence. Both novels enact Gaines' belief that the South needs new narratives of manhood.

In *A Gathering of Old Men* Gaines focuses on a group of old black men in their seventies and eighties, who have been 'boys' all their lives, not only in the eyes of the white men they have worked for but also in their own eyes. Born after Reconstruction failed in the South, they have grown up only to be beaten down by racial prejudice and boxed in by Jim Crow laws that have kept them in an inferior position socially and economically. The civil rights movement and its resulting laws have had little effect on their lives, which continue to be shaped by segregation and economic dependency on whites. These old black men, who once worked in various capacities on the white-owned plantations, continue to live gratis in the old slave quarters. Many of the old men who were once sharecroppers or skilled artisans find the prospects for their children's lives even less promising than their own because their children are now working as labourers for Cajun farmers who are renting the land that they used to sharecrop. Social customs of deference to whites – looking down, going to the

back door – remain unchanged. These social and economic facts, conditions Gaines has termed 'de facto slavery',[5] give *A Gathering of Old Men* the feel of a historical novel rather than one set in contemporary times.

The subordinate position of these old black men has not only lowered their self-esteem, it has caused doubts about their manhood, which they, like the white men they work for, define in traditional terms as providing for and protecting their families. This blurring of gender identity with maturity reflects the power of gender ideology to shape conceptions of the self. Hazel Carby argues in *Recontructing Womanhood* that manhood as traditionally defined by western society could not be achieved or maintained by black men 'because of the inability of the slave to protect the black woman.'[6] In this regard, Gaines' old black men have lived lives not very different from slaves. Each tells a story of a sister or brother, son or daughter, who was at the very least treated unfairly by whites, at the worst raped or killed by whites. Each knows that he did nothing to stop white injustice, not only because he felt powerless to do so, but also because he feared for his life if he stood up for equal and just treatment. The old men's feelings of fear and powerlessness, which keep them socially impotent, have created problems for black women as well. The men have taken out their frustrations with white society and with themselves by verbally and physically abusing their wives. Citing similar scenes in James Joyce's *Dubliners* and William Faulkner's 'Dry September', Gaines sees such behaviour as universal: 'All men have hopes, and all men brutalize others things near them at home, when they cannot fulfill such hopes.'[7] Sociologist Clyde Franklin, who has researched the effect of institutionalised racism on black men in the United States, argues that 'structural barriers to Black male sex-role adoption, then have produced a Black male who is primed for a conflictual relationship with Black women.'[8] The question has become what part the social construction of race, class, and masculinity play in causing male frustration to be enacted as violence.

When Gandhi worked with the nonviolent struggle in South Africa, he argued that passive violence (such as that practised by racist whites in the American South) must be eliminated in order to rid society of physical violence: 'Passive violence in the form of discrimination, oppression, exploitation, hate, anger and all the subtle ways in which it manifests itself gives rise to physical violence in

society.'[9] In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the mostly passive violence of white land owners and the mostly physical violence of the white working class produce the black violence that occurs in the novel. In order for Charlie to explain why he killed Beau Boutan in self-defence, he must begin forty-five years earlier when he first ran from someone who abused him. Beau's abuse pushed Charlie over the edge: 'It took fifty years. Half a hundred – and I said I been 'bused enough. He used to 'buse me. No matter if I did twice the work any other man could do, he 'bused me anyhow... And long as I was Big Charlie, nigger boy, I took it... But they comes a day! They comes a day when a man must be a man' (p. 189). A similar day finally comes for the old men as well, a day when they will take no more abuse, when they are ready to take a stand. To explain their behaviour to Sheriff Mapes, they too return to the past and tell stories of white injustice.

According to Mathu, a man is not afraid to do 'what he thinks is right ... That's what part him from a boy' (p. 85). The other old men have never done what they thought was right. They have never stood up to whites to protect themselves and their families and friends from rape and murder and discrimination – until the day on which this novel takes place. Responding to white plantation owner Candy Marshall's request to protect the man who has been influential in her growing up, they rally around Mathu with their twelve-gauge shotguns. It is not surprising that the one black man, Clatoo, whom Candy does not have power over, emerges as the leader of the old men, insisting on their right to congregate alone and to make decisions without Candy. Because Clatoo owns his own land and gardening business, he does not depend on Candy for his home or livelihood, a fact she threatens the other men with: '"Y'all can go on and listen to Clatoo if y'all want," she said. "But remember this – Clatoo got a little piece of land to go back to. Y'all don't have nothing but this. You listen to him now, and you won't even have this"' (p. 174). Sheriff Mapes' assessment, 'you want to keep them slaves the rest of their lives' (p. 175) suggests that Candy's desire to help the black people is combined with a desire to control them and take responsibility for them that is reminiscent of nineteenth-century planters' paternal roles.[10]

Standing up first to white injustice and then to Candy's paternalism is not enough to make the old black men feel like men, rather

it takes an act of physical force to certify their manhood. They have no doubt that Beau's father, Fix Boutan, who has allegedly fixed the fate of several black men and women in the past, will seek revenge for his son's death and give them the opportunity to stop him with force. Although a number of them are afraid, they know that they have only their fear to lose and very much to gain. Facing death, the old men are determined to act like 'men' before they die, thereby winning self-respect and respect from Mathu, the only man in their community thought to be 'a real man' (p. 84). Previously only Mathu has stood up to whites, only Mathu has fought with white men who demean him. Thus, before Charlie Biggs confesses, everyone assumes that Mathu has killed Beau Boutan. Sheriff Mapes' certainty of Mathu's guilt and Mapes' easy equation of violence and masculinity is testimony to the casual, often unconscious, way language is used to reinforce gender ideology, 'he killed him all right. The only one with nuts enough to do it' (p. 72).

The novel turns on an interesting paradox in defining manhood as it relates to 'race'. In order for Fix's youngest son Gil to be a man, he must refuse to kill the black man who has murdered his brother Beau; in order for each old black man to be a man, he must be ready to kill a white man. The old men only see themselves as men when they follow what Bob Connell has identified as the 'hegemonic masculinity' in western society, a model associated with aggressiveness and the capacity for violence.[11] The white man becomes a man when he rejects this model. The behaviour that Gaines deems manly for each racial group is based on the history of race relations in the rural South. The old black men long, understandably, to get even for all the injustice their families have experienced at the hands of white people. The young white man Gil wants to put a stop to the misunderstanding, hatred, and violence that has characterised Southern race relations and come to epitomise his family's reputation in the community.

As a football player at Louisiana State University, Gil has grown to respect, like, and depend on Cal, a black player on his team. Together they are Salt and Pepper, destined to become All-Americans and win the conference title for their university. Together they have become a symbol of improved race relations in a new South. The 'publicity people' (p. 111) at the University have invented the nickname, encouraged the symbolism, and profited from the alliance:

> It would be the first time this had ever happened, black and white in the same backfield – and in the Deep South, besides. LSU was fully aware of this, the black and white communities in Baton Rouge were aware of this, and so was the rest of the country. Wherever you went, people spoke of Salt and Pepper of LSU. (p. 112)

For Gil and Cal the relationship is more than symbolic. Gaines uses their relationship to suggest that when diverse peoples live and work together for common goals, stereotypes fall on rocky soil and racial hatreds wither and die.[12]

Gil's decision not to join his father in vengeful and violent behaviour is seen by his father and the older men in his family as unmanly, and they impugn his manhood by identifying Gil's restraint as feminine, 'He [Gil] says sit, weep with the women' (p. 145). Furthermore, Fix doubts Gil's racial pride because he views his behaviour as choosing black over white, 'Your brother's honor for the sake to play football side by side with the niggers' (p. 143). Gaines emphasises the difficulty Gil has in opposing conventional masculine behaviour by having Gil repeatedly ask the old white men gathered, 'Haven't I been a good boy?' and 'Aren't I a good boy?' (p. 147). The power of gender ideology makes Gil blur gender identity with obedience and family loyalty.

While in some respects Gaines portrays this conflict between Gil and his father as generational and in doing so projects a more hopeful future, at the same time, he creates several young white 'rednecks', who subscribe to the old conventions. The leader of the group, Luke Will, publicly tries to shame Gil and his brother Jean into avenging Beau's death by attacking their manhood and appealing to racial solidarity. To Luke Will, a white man is not a man if he associates with blacks: 'Gilly and Jean want to keep their good names with the niggers. Gilly want to play football with niggers, mess around with them little stinky nigger gals. Beat Ole Miss tomorrow, that's what he wants. As for Mr Jean there, he has to sell his hog guts and cracklings to the niggers. No decent white man would buy 'em' (p. 142). Luke Will's attempt to shame Gil and Jean Boutan for refusing to fight does not work any more than their father's attempt because Gil and Jean have become members of a larger, raciallymixed community and have left behind the violent practices of what Southern historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown identifies as 'primal honor.'[13] That Gil is col-

lege-educated is certainly significant. While Gil's father thinks that an education at LSU should reinforce the old Southern code, Gaines suggests otherwise. An education opens Gil's mind to the racial discrimination and oppression in the rural community in which he grew up. In Wyatt-Brown's terms, because Gil puts individual conscience before reputation in the community, personal guilt before public shame,[14] he is able to make an unpopular stand in his family, which seeks to defend its honour, and in his parish, which seeks to keep black people in their customary place.

For Gaines, Gil becomes a man when he refuses to use or sanction violence, a reversal of the primal code of honour practised by Gil's Cajun family and working-class whites in the community. In refusing to participate in the accustomed masculine behaviour, Gil takes the fictional step for his social class that Faulkner's Bayard Sartoris took for upper-class whites in *The Unvanquished*, when he withstands both family and community pressure to kill his father's murderer. Because of Gil's compassion for the old black men, his father flippantly calls him 'a regular Christ' and sarcastically quips, 'Feels sorry for the entire world' (p. 145). Gaines expects the reader to take this comparison more seriously, as a new vision of southern white working-class manhood. This new vision includes the ability to express emotion other than anger (Gil cries in this scene), to articulate one's feelings, to empathise with black people, and to resolve conflict in non-aggressive ways.[15] Gil's and Jean's experiences indicate that solidarity is predicated not on race, or class for that matter, but on community, whether on the football field at LSU or in the town of Bayonne where Jean is a butcher.

With the scene between the professor of African-American literature from University of Southwestern Louisiana and Jack Marshall, who owns the plantation where Beau has been shot, Gaines suggests a reconstruction of masculine identity for upper-class southern white men as well, a definition which includes trying to find solutions to continuing racial tensions in one's community, whether one is personally involved in them or not. Whereas Jack Marshall escapes the conflict by leaving the plantation and drinking himself into oblivion at Tee Jack's bar, the professor suggests that in ignoring the situation, Marshall passively contributes to the violence. The professor asserts that 'In the end, it's people like us, you and I, who pay for this,' and 'The debt is never finished as long as we stand for this' (p.

165). This professor, who teaches the same subjects at the same university where Ernest Gaines teaches, seems to be Gaines' variation on the Alfred Hitchcock convention of including himself in his films. That Gaines put himself into a white body, if he wrote himself into the novel, is an interesting riff on his theme of dismantling stereotypes and fostering improved race relations.

Whatever his accomplishments are in the classroom, this articulate, open-minded professor is unable to convince Luke Will and his cohorts to change their behaviour by reasoning with them for a few minutes in a bar. The professor's call for restraint is met with Luke Will's physical intimidation to leave the bar. When Tee Jack, the bar owner, protests that the professor is a white man, Luke Will responds, 'If he's a white man, let him act like one' (p. 165). Ernest Gaines suggests that Luke Will cannot follow the professor's advice because he has not been socially conditioned to perceive such beliefs and behaviour as worthy of 'real white men'. Luke Will has defined his manhood in terms of his ability to make life hard for 'niggers' (p. 159) and to keep the parish segregated. This aggressive behaviour allows him to assert his power not only over the black people whom he antagonises, but also over the educated white men of a higher social class than himself (like the professor) who have created new laws to end segregation, and thus life in the South as Luke Will knows it. As a result, he can only define masculine bravery as fighting, not as refusing to fight. It is telling that during the shootout Luke's buddy Sharp defines the old black men as 'brave' (p. 204) at the point when they physically defend themselves, behaviour the white men do not expect from black men.

In order to help rationalise his decision to take the law into his own hands, Luke Will asserts that the 'Next thing you know, they'll [black men] be raping the women' (p. 149). The Deputy Sheriff's comment, 'If they can't get you one way, they'll bring in the women every time' (p. 149) is evidence that white men have played the sex card in the past, especially during the 1880s and 1890s when they lost political power to northern Reconstructionists and to black men and when they lost economic power to an agricultural depression and to black male competition for jobs. Joel Williamson argues that because southern white men could not play the role of 'protector-as-breadwinner' for their women as well as they expected during this time, they focused on another part of the traditional masculine role – 'pro-

tector-as-defender of the purity of their women, in this instance against the imagined threat from the black beast rapist.'[16] During this period they revised their 'Sambo' image of black men so as to justify their own violent behaviour. The power of rhetoric to shape perceptions is particularly evident during this time in the case of Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s novels and plays, especially *The Clansman* (1905), which D. W. Griffith made into a film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), thereby purveying to millions of people the image of black men as brutes and rapists. Joel Williamson points out that it was Dixon's novel, *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), not 'scholarly' articles or political tracts, that popularised white southerners' racist views.[17]

With *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines rewrites Dixon's narratives of white masculinity. Although working-class Luke Will certainly thinks of himself as a man because of his willingness to defend the white community against blacks who have forgotten 'their place,' Ernest Gaines represents Will and his cohorts as boys and portrays their bravery as braggadocio. Big-talking Leroy, who can't wait to wield his gun against the old black men, turns into a 'sniveling' (p. 202) little boy when he is grazed by a bullet in the shootout. His ineffectual pleas for mercy from the Sheriff, 'I'm a white boy, Mapes,' and 'I ain't nothing but a child, Mapes,' (p. 203), are among the funniest lines in the novel. The irony, of course, is heavy and twofold. First, being white no longer automatically gives one protection in the eyes of the law. Second, from the protected distance of Tee Jack's Bar, this 'child' had been 'ready to kick me some ass' (p. 166), but he crumples when he finds himself in the crossfire of live ammunition. Also, unlike Charlie Biggs, who as proof of his maturity takes responsibility for his actions and admits to killing Beau, Leroy will not admit that his cohorts have shot Sheriff Mapes; he falsely accuses the old black men.

In 'Rereading American Literature' James Riener argues that manhood for the old black men in *A Gathering of Old Men* is 'to be found, not in wielding power over others, but in a man's response to the attempts to wield power over him.'[18] This is certainly true – the old men withstand Sheriff Mapes' slaps and Luke Will's bullets. Plus they are willing, as Riener suggests, 'to accept the consequences for the murder and for their defiance of the sheriff.' The willingness to accept responsibility for one's actions is especially true in the case of Charlie, who shoots Beau in self-defence but initially allows his par-

rain Mathu to take the rap for the murder because he is afraid that, given past workings of the white-dominated legal system, he will never get a fair trial.[19]

The scene in which Charlie returns and confesses in front of his relatives, the sheriff, and the old black men parallels the scene in which Gil changes the pattern of behaviour expected of him and emerges as a man, willing to accept responsibility for his actions. The main differences, of course, are that Gil is a young white man and Charlie is a fifty-year-old black man. Charlie declares before all gathered that at fifty years old, he is finally a man, 'I want the world to know it. I ain't Big Charlie, nigger boy, no more, I'm a man. Y'all hear me? A man come back. Not no nigger boy. A nigger boy run and run and run. But a man come back. I'm a man' (p. 187). Referred to by whites as 'Beau's nigger' and Beau's 'boy' because he works for Beau, he demands to be called Mr Biggs by the white men assembled, Sheriff Mapes and the reporter Lou Dimes. With Charlie's demand, Gaines once again underlines the power of language to construct identity. The use of the appellation 'Mr' which signifies respect and has heretofore in southern society been reserved for adult white men, redefines Charlie as a man, not a boy.

While James Riener is correct to point out that it is not important that the old black men's defiance of white establishment culminates in a fight because they have proved their manhood to themselves,[20] most of them don't think so. Ironically the manly behaviour that the old black men are eager to exhibit comes in part from their capacity for violence and from a desire for revenge, which has the potential to threaten the emerging new relationship between the races as symbolised in the cooperation of Gil and Cal on the football field. Indeed, Gaines originally titled the novel, 'The Revenge of Old Men,' but says he changed it 'because these guys don't get any revenge; they're just gathering.'[21] After Charlie's confession, both Clatoo and Mathu suggest that the old men go home, pointing out that they have proven their manhood, just by standing up to Sheriff Mapes. They have gained self-respect and the respect of everyone there, black and white. But Rooster's reaction is typical of the majority:

> I was thinking now about all the hurt I had suffered, the insults my wife had suffered right in front of my face. I was thinking

> about what all the old people musta gone through even before me. I was thinking about all that – and this was the day we was go'n get even. But now here Clatoo was saying we ought to go back home. Go back home and do what? I hadn't even fired a shot. Just one, in that pecan tree, so I could have a empty shell. No, that wasn't enough. Not after what I had put up with all these years. I wanted me a fight, even if I had to get killed. (p. 181)

At this point the old black men are ready to take their memories of injustice out on any white man, similar to the way white men have treated them in the past. Earlier in the afternoon Gable says he is ready to kill Fix because 'he was just like them who throwed my boy in that electric chair and pulled that switch. No, he wan't born yet, but the same blood run in all their vein' (p. 102). The old men are very disappointed when Fix does not show up to avenge Beau's death because they have projected onto him the responsibility for all past injustice.

Sheriff Mapes expresses the paradoxical nature of contemporary race relations this way when he blames the old men for Fix's failure to arrive:

> Y'all the one – you cut your own throats. You told God you wanted Salt and Pepper to get together, and God did it for you. At the same time, you wanted God to keep Fix the way Fix was thirty years ago so one day you would get a chance to shoot him. Well, God couldn't do both. Not that He likes Fix, but He thought the other idea was better – Salt and Pepper. Well? Which do you want? (p. 171)

But God can do 'both', as Ernest Gaines illustrates. Although Fix does not show up, Luke Will does – giving the old men a chance not simply to stand up to attempts to wield power over them, but the chance to respond violently. To many readers, it seems only poetic justice, although hardly indicative of a new southern masculine order, that the old men get to fire their shotguns. While they have proven their courage and Mathu's innocence before Luke's arrival, fighting seems necessary to prove their manhood, at least to them, if not to Gaines.

But it is Gaines, of course, who creates the fight and allows the men to do more than 'gather'. And Coot says he hasn't felt so

good since the First World War. Using slapstick humour, Gaines makes the fight more comic than tragic, even though two men are killed: the black 'boy' who becomes a man when he admits to shooting Beau Boutan, and the white man who remains a 'boy' because he refuses to leave justice to the courts. When Luke Will wants to stop the fight and turn himself and his boys in, it is Charlie Biggs who encourages the old men to continue the fight, perhaps another reason Charlie must die in the end – because he encourages the black men to take justice into their own hands as the white men have done in the past. For Charlie, 'standing up to Luke Will' (p. 208) is equally as important as standing up for his rights. When Lou Dimes tells him that Luke Will wants to turn himself in and warns Charlie that if he continues to fight he will be charged with murder, not self-defence as with Beau, Charlie refuses to stop fighting, and he even enlists the old men to help him. One could argue that the old men lose some moral ground by following Charlie's lead rather than that of Mathu and Clatoo.

Gaines' novel has two resolutions to the black-white conflict: first a shootout and then a trial. These dual resolutions allow readers to have it 'both ways' because they get an emotional catharsis resolved by traditional masculine behaviour in the shootout, but re-resolved in the trial that follows, by talk rather than aggression. The judge sentences all the men involved, both black and white, to a life without guns for the next five years. Gaines seems to have thought the shootout necessary to fulfil reader expectations because in an interview he says: 'They brought guns, and I still believe in the old Chekhovian idea that if the gun is over the mantel at the beginning of the play, the gun must go off by the time the curtain comes down. And I thought that the only way the gun could go off in my book was Charlie and Luke Will out on the street shooting at each other.'[22] Gaines' reply when asked to compare the novel's ending with that of the television movie is significant. The movie ends with Luke Will backing down once he sees that the old men have guns. There is no shootout, but there is not a trial banning guns either. When asked whether the ending of the television movie made a different point to that of the novel, Gaines replied, 'I don't know if there's any difference at all. I think what I was trying to do in that entire book was show a group of old men standing.'[23] It is interesting that when Gaines thinks of the novel's impact, he focuses on the old men gath-

ering to support Mathu, finally taking a stand against white injustice and discrimination – not on the shootout that follows. Indeed, in the novel Gaines states that most of the old men are not very good shots, and he gives them comic roles in the fight as if to distance them from the deaths caused by this tragic encounter. While Gaines only refers to Charlie and Luke Will when he talks about the shootout, the old men are certainly emotionally as well as actively, if ineptly, involved in this event.

Unlike Gaines, I think the double ending he chooses for the novel does make a difference. The two endings support contradictory themes about violence and masculinity. The first ending suggests that fighting is the only emotionally satisfying and manly way to resolve an argument; the second reaffirms what Gaines has already proved in the novel – that talking can produce results. While Fix suggests that talking is the equivalent of doing 'nothing' (p. 144), Gaines proves otherwise in the gradual change that Sheriff Mapes undergoes as he listens to Charlie's and the old men's personal accounts of injustice and discrimination. Granted, Gaines does not suggest that talk always works. The conversation the English professor has with Jack Marshall is disappointing, and his exchange with Luke Will is ineffective. Similarly, Gil too struggles to make his father understand his new views about race relations. Begging his friend Sully to help him, Gil is still unable to move his father beyond football to civil rights, beyond Gil's chance at being an all-American to his heroic attempt to stop the cycle of violence. Gil's father views him as a coward rather than as the brave young man Gaines presents. In contrast, the storytelling of the old black men is incredibly effective, particularly that of Tucker, Johnny Paul, and Charlie. They recreate scenes and situations so that the people listening, Sheriff Mapes and Gaines' readers, can see and feel the injustice they are talking about. Their stories are told with conviction, emotion, detail, and explanation. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Janie tells her friend Pheoby, ''tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it.'[24] The old men provide their listeners with just such 'understanding' of the oppression that has shaped their lives and their identities.

As for Gaines' assertion about readers' expectations and the convention of the gun, he does have a point. Many viewers of the television movie who had also read the book felt that the television end-

ing was disappointing; they preferred the shootout to the gathering.[25] Perhaps their disappointment is the natural reaction to viewing a movie ending that departs so radically from the novel. But perhaps these readers, like Gaines, expect guns to go off if they appear. Or perhaps they are used to violence as a tool to settle men's disputes and to conclude men's plots. In *Before Reading*, Peter Rabinowitz explains that 'in a given literary context, when certain elements appear, rules of configuration activate certain expectations.'[26] However, Rabinowitz goes on to explain that the writer can make use of readers' expectations in a variety of ways: 'not only to create a sense of resolution (that is, by completing the patterns that the rules lead readers to expect, either with or without detours) but also to create surprise (by reversing them, for instance, or by deflecting them, or by fulfilling them in some unanticipated way).' Gaines could have had Luke Will back down when faced with so many guns, which is what the television scriptwriter did, or he could have had Charlie heed Lou Dimes' advice and end the fight. Either ending would have been more in keeping with Gaines' stated focus on 'a gathering of old men' rather than 'the revenge of old men'. How writers use literary conventions can affect the meaning conveyed. Gaines speculates that television movie producers found his original resolution too sensitive for a large viewing audience given the current racial climate: 'maybe they just didn't want a black and white shootout, killing each other off.'[27] To me, the ending of the novel sends an ambivalent message about violence. Gaines clearly is more interested in talk than in violence, in the power of storytelling rather than the power of guns. If he had banned the guns before the courtroom, thereby using the guns in a surprising way rather than the expected way, his novel would not have required two endings to get his point across.

While five years may be enough time in Gaines' fictional parish for blacks and whites to start dismantling racial stereotypes, reconstructing manhood, and learning to solve disagreements without violence, it took ten years for Gaines to find a way of writing beyond the conventional endings of stories about race and masculinity.[28] In *A Lesson Before Dying* he reconstructs black manhood in a way very different from his definition in *A Gathering of Old Men*. Though set in 1948, *A Lesson Before Dying* speaks to several contemporary issues: the racially imbalanced use of the death penalty, the responsibility of middle-class blacks for the larger black community, ques-

tions of gender-role egalitarianism, and new definitions of manhood. In 'A New Vision of Masculinity' Cooper Thompson delineates attitudes and behaviour that he says boys do not often learn but that he thinks boys should be taught. He includes 'being supportive and nurturant, accepting one's vulnerability and being able to ask for help, valuing women and "women's work," understanding and expressing emotions (except for anger), the ability to empathize with and empower other people, and learning to resolve conflict in non-aggressive, non-competitive ways.'[29] These are the behaviours that Gil exhibits in *A Gathering of Old Men* and that Gaines' black male characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* must learn in order to become men. But before they can implement these lessons, they must learn one key fact: that the white power structure has defined, and thereby confined, black people. Grant Wiggins, an elementary school teacher, has learned this lesson in college; he must teach it to Jefferson, who is in jail, in order for him to become something other than the 'animal' white society has said he is. Although this lesson cannot free Jefferson from an unfair execution for a crime he did not commit (Jefferson is sentenced to death in the electric chair), it frees him to create himself mentally and emotionally within white society's prison.

To emphasise the white construction of black social reality, Gaines opens his novel with three versions of what happened the night Jefferson, in the wrong place at the wrong time, entered a store with two black friends. Their attempt to rob the store results in the white store owner and Jefferson's friends fatally shooting each other. Jefferson, who is a bit slow-witted, is unable to process what has happened before his eyes. He takes a drink to calm his nerves and then steals from the open cash register because he has no money and there are no witnesses. But to explain his actions, both the prosecuting attorney and the defence attorney tell stories that reveal assumptions of biological racial differences, the kinds of assumptions that white southerners used first to defend slavery and then to justify segregation. The prosecuting attorney argues that Jefferson is an 'animal' who 'celebrated the event by drinking over their still-bleeding bodies' (p. 6-7). The defence attorney, trying to prove that Jefferson is not capable of planning a robbery, also argues that he is not a 'man':

> Gentleman of the jury, look at him – look at him – look at this. Do you see a man sitting here? Do you see a man sitting here?

> I ask you, I implore, look carefully – do you see a man sitting here? Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand – look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan – can plan – can plan anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa – yes, yes, that he can do – but to plan? To plan, gentlemen of the jury? No, gentlemen, this skull here holds no plans. What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn ... Why I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this. (pp. 7-8)

After the trial, Gaines underlines the power of the white man's words by having Jefferson become the 'hog' that his lawyer has named him – dirty, unkempt, and rude. When Grant first visits Jefferson at the request of Jefferson's godmother who wants Grant to make him a man before he dies, Jefferson shows no concern for his godmother and eats the food that she has sent without using his hands. He acts this way both in reaction to and as a result of being called 'a hog' at the trial – a cause and effect sequence of scenes that is emblematic of the social construction of black manhood in southern society.

Grant's first sessions with Jefferson have no effect. Grant's pedagogical techniques include modelling polite behaviour for Jefferson, trying to make Jefferson feel guilty for hurting his godmother's feelings, and exploiting the bad relations with whites by telling Jefferson that they are betting against Grant's project with him. At first Grant fails with Jefferson for the same reason he is failing with his elementary school students. He does not want to teach, he is cynical about the prospect of making a difference, and thus he is angry about being forced into such a position.

Grant does not reach Jefferson until he changes his tactics. Only when Grant shifts the focus of their meetings from himself to Jefferson, which is where the focus should be, given that Grant has agreed to help Jefferson, does Grant begin to have a positive effect. First, he establishes a rapport with an open-minded and congenial young white deputy, who gives him important information about Jefferson's daily life and his state of mind. Then he has a conversation with Jefferson about the purpose of their meetings, which unlike his

previous lectures allows Jefferson to talk about what is most important to him – dying – rather than what is most important to Grant – making Jefferson's godmother feel better. Also, Grant becomes more patient and empathetic, focusing on the reasons for Jefferson's rude behaviour rather than on the behaviour itself. For example, when Jefferson insults Vivian, Grant's lover, Grant wants to hit him, but thinks before he strikes him, 'I recognized his grin for what it was – the expression of the most heartrending pain I had ever seen on anyone's face' (p. 130). Finally, Grant asks Jefferson philosophical questions that make him think about how to live.

When the date is scheduled for Jefferson's execution, Grant instinctively adds another strategy to his plan, asking Jefferson if there is anything he wants. He brings him a radio, comic books, and a pad and pencil. Grant's students send pecans and peanuts, and Grant promises Jefferson that he will have what he wants to eat on his last day. Finally, Grant tells Jefferson he would like to be his friend. The care and respect that Grant shows Jefferson have an effect. Jefferson begins to care for and to respect Grant, and to show concern for those who have shown kindness to him. When Jefferson thinks of others as well as himself and tells Grant to thank the children for the pecans they sent, Grant feels he has made a breakthrough.

The third stage of Grant's lessons with Jefferson involves defining four crucial words for him: friend, 'a friend would do anything to please a friend'; hero, 'a hero does for others'; scapegoat, 'someone else to blame'; and myth, 'a myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they're better than anyone else on earth – and that's a myth' (pp. 190-192). With the first two words Grant challenges Jefferson to fulfil his potential, to become both friend and hero. Grant's definition of 'hero' matches Gaines': 'it occurred to me one day that the only black people I new as a child *were* heroes... My hero is a person who will get up and go to work every damn day, and see himself not accomplishing much that day or maybe the next day, but will get up anyway and try it again, against the odds, to make life a little bit better.'[30] With the final two words, scapegoat and myth, Grant enables Jefferson to see how white people have shaped his identity: 'To them, you're nothing but another nigger – no dignity, no heart, no love for your people' (p. 191). It is this knowledge of the social construction of black masculinity that frees Jefferson to be a man in his own mind and a hero in his community.

Gaines suggests that because Jefferson has internalised white racism, he has limited what he expects of himself, and he has accepted mistreatment and disrespect as his due. Jefferson tells Grant, 'Yes, I'm youman, Mr Wiggins. But nobody didn't know that 'fore now. Cuss for nothing. Beat for nothing. Work for nothing. Grinned to get by. Everybody thought that's how it was s'pose to be. You too, Mr Wiggins. You never thought I was nothing else. I didn't neither' (p. 224).

Gaines shows that while language can be used to construct reality, it can also be used to deconstruct and redefine it. It is significant that at Jefferson's trial he does not speak for himself; white lawyers speak for and about him. When the judge asks if Jefferson has anything to say before the sentencing, he keeps his head down and says nothing. Grant gives Jefferson the encouragement to voice his thoughts and emotions and the words to understand and articulate what has happened to him. Gaines uses language, the diary that Jefferson has kept, as moving proof of Jefferson's dignity, integrity, and humanity. Despite the grammar, spelling, and punctuation mistakes, the diary is proof of Jefferson's ability to 'stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all' (p. 192). Until Grant's interest in him, Jefferson writes that 'nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im sombody' (p. 232). Abandoned by his parents, he says no one has ever shown him affection, or complimented him, or asked him what he wanted. One of the most poignant passages in Jefferson's diary regards the effects of this emotional deprivation: 'mr wigin i just feel like tellin you i like you but i dont kno how to say this cause i aint never say it to nobody before an nobody aint never say it to me' (p. 228). Although white people have made Jefferson an 'animal', Grant dismantles white notions of black masculinity and reconstructs Jefferson's manhood. Before his death Jefferson exhibits the 'grace under pressure' that Gaines so much admires in Ernest Hemingway's heroes.[31]

But it is in his depiction of Grant's coming to manhood that Gaines moves beyond Hemingway's model of manhood, for Gaines is ultimately more interested in how to live than in how to die, in the creation of new worlds rather than in the death of old ones. That Jefferson learns the lessons that Grant teaches, that he makes something of himself even within the confines of a jail cell and a few weeks, becomes a lesson for Grant, who by succeeding with Jefferson, learns that he can make a difference by teaching in the rural South. In

becoming a teacher, Grant has thought that whites have controlled his fate as much as they have controlled Jefferson's because teaching is one of the few careers that educated blacks are allowed to have in the 1940s South. Gaines shows that although this may be true, Grant can control how and what he teaches. Plus Gaines suggests that Grant's teaching is necessary to deconstruct white definitions of black manhood. But when the novel opens, Grant is pessimistic about the chances of making a difference in his students' lives: 'I teach what the white folks around here tell me to teach – reading, writing, and 'rithmetic. They never told me how to keep a black boy out of a liquor store' (p. 13). Gaines juxtaposes Grant's thoughts of Jefferson's fate with the illegible papers that he is grading, with the memories of boys he went to school with who have been killed or sent to prison for killing someone else, and with the sight of his young male students who act exactly like the illiterate black men who bring wood to the school. Grant's thoughts depress him:

> Am I reaching them at all? They are acting exactly as the old men did earlier. They are fifty years younger, maybe more, but doing the same thing those old men did who never attended school a day in their lives. Is it just a vicious circle? Am I doing anything? (p. 62)

But when he is teaching Jefferson about the social construction of identity, Grant realises how he has short-changed his own students for six years: 'I have always done what they [the white school board] wanted me to do, teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Nothing else – nothing about dignity, nothing about identity, nothing about loving and caring' (p. 192). Given the effect Grant has on Jefferson by teaching him just such lessons, Gaines suggests that these other subjects are equally as important as the three Rs.

In *A Lesson Before Dying* Gaines revises the ending of his first novel *Catherine Carmier* (1964), in which a young college-educated black man, Jackson, decides he cannot remain in the South and face the daily indignities of oppression and institutionalised racism. At the end of the novel, Jackson decides he must leave the South to retain his dignity and maintain his sanity, but Gaines suggests that leaving may be an escapist fantasy because Jackson earlier reveals that life outside the South is not much better than life in the South, as far as racism goes – just different. The prejudice is more covert. In this first novel Gaines abandons Jackson's quest to discover a fulfill-

ing career and a congenial place, only to take it up thirty years later with Grant in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Although *Catherine Carmier* begins as a quest plot, it becomes a love story – perhaps because at that time Gaines could not imagine a solution to Jackson's dilemma about how and where to live. But the resolution of the love story is not happy either. Catherine, the light-skinned woman whom Jackson loves, does not leave with him because she can not bring herself to abandon her father, who has always segregated himself and his family from people as dark-skinned as Jackson. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines is kinder to his protagonist. He gives Grant both a job teaching in rural Louisiana and Vivian, a Creole woman of colour who, unlike Catherine, has successfully rebelled against her colour-conscious family. But Grant continues to question his decision to stay and teach.[32] When the novel opens, Grant cynically asks how he is supposed to teach a man how to die when he himself is 'still trying to find out how a man should live' (p. 31). His most influential childhood teacher, Matthew Antoine, has taught him a lesson that he cannot forget:

> He told us then that most of us would die violently, and those who did not would be brought down to the level of beasts. Told us that there was no other choice but to run and run... He could teach any of us only one thing, and that one thing was flight. Because there was no freedom here. He said it, and he didn't say it. But we felt it. (pp. 62-63)

When Grant decides to return to rural Louisiana after college, Matthew Antoine discourages him, 'You'll see that it'll take more than five and a half months to wipe away – peel – scrape away the blanket of ignorance that has been plastered and replastered over those brains in the past three hundred years' (p. 64).

Grant learns Antoine's lessons well. Although he stays in the South, he is bitter about white racism and cynical about whether he is having any effect on his students. These factors combine to keep him alienated and on the verge of leaving. That his aunt should ask him to help Jefferson die with dignity presents a special problem for Grant. He himself has gained dignity and self-respect by leaving the plantation, and he worries that the humiliating encounters he must have with the white power structure in order to help Jefferson – going through the plantation owner's back door, being made to wait by

whites, and having his body searched at the jail – will slowly strip him of his hard-earned self-respect: 'Professor Antoine told me that if I stayed here, they were going to break me down to the nigger I was born to be' (p. 79).[33]

But in the course of this novel, Gaines gives Grant some new teachers, most remarkably his own pupil Jefferson. But perhaps equally influential in guiding Grant to manhood is his lady friend Vivian. Their relationship is very different from any other male-female relationships in Gaines's fiction. Unlike Phillip and Alma in Gaines's *In My Father's House* (1978), who do not have an equal or emotionally intimate relationship, Grant and Vivian are very much equals and they talk with each other about their lives. Thus Vivian provides Grant not simply with emotional support but with crucial advice when he most feels like giving up on Jefferson. In *A Lesson Before Dying* Vivian, who is also a teacher, is more than a love interest; she provides the role model for Grant that Mathu provides for the old men in *A Gathering of Old Men*. But, unlike Mathu, Vivian teaches Grant the lessons that Cooper Thompson says are attitudes and behaviours boys traditionally have not learned. When Vivian visits Grant at the house he shares with his aunt, she gets him to help her do the dishes rather than leaving them for his aunt to do, thus teaching them that domestic work is not by definition woman's work. Because Vivian must be prudent in her relationship with Grant, so that she will not lose her children before her divorce is final, Vivian teaches Grant that in family relationships the individual cannot always fulfil his or her desires first. Also, since Vivian is a committed elementary school teacher, she shows Grant that individual fulfillment involves commitment to others.

While Grant's most important lesson for Jefferson is about the social construction of race and masculinity, Vivian's most important lesson for Grant is about violence and manhood. She teaches him this lesson after dragging him out of a bar room brawl. Grant has started a fight with two mulatto bricklayers whom he overhears maligning Jefferson as a discredit to men of colour. At first, Grant effectively deflects his own anger into thoughts about why the men were making such insensitive remarks: 'They were probably out of work, and it was just plain frustration that made them go on like that' (p. 198). But Gaines uses the Old Forester that Grant has been drinking to instigate a fight, much like the fights that occur elsewhere in Gaines' fiction.

However, this fight is a brief three pages, very different in length and function from, for example, the fight in *Of Love and Dust* (1967), which begins as a squabble over cards and sprawls over two chapters. While such violence in *Of Love and Dust* seems gratuitous and the violence in *A Gathering of Old Men* results in a battle between ideology and literary convention, the fight in *A Lesson Before Dying* functions as a key scene representing the necessity to redefine masculinity. Gaines devotes much more narrative time to a discussion between Vivian and Grant about the violence he has provoked than to the fight itself. With Vivian's lesson ('That's how you all get yourselves killed,' p. 206), Gaines underlines consequences for men who fight rather than talk or walk away from potential violence. The placement of this scene is crucial. It comes right after the pivotal scene in which Grant has succeeded in making Jefferson understand that he is as much a man as any other man, white or black. During Grant's discussion with Vivian about his fight, he tries to change the subject from his behaviour in the bar to what he has accomplished with Jefferson, which he expects will make Vivian 'proud' of him (p. 207). But for Vivian, Grant's readiness to fight overshadows his success with Jefferson. Thus, Vivian feels 'disgusted' (p. 209) not only by Grant's failure to control his behaviour, but also by his failure to think about the consequences of his fighting, both for himself and for her and her children. At this precarious time when she is awaiting a divorce from her first husband and trying to keep custody of her children, she must be the model of propriety. Just as Grant asks Jefferson difficult questions about friendship love, and family, Vivian asks Grant hard questions about meaningful relationships between men and women, about sex and love, and about marriage. Grant's first emotion is anger, and his first inclination is to run out on her, but he thinks better of both. This chapter ends with the sentence, 'I knelt down and buried my face in her lap' (p. 210) – a striking contrast to the previous chapter which ends with Grant 'standing up' after the fight (p. 203). Gaines makes Grant's kneeling courageous, more an act of manhood than his ability to win the fight with the bricklayers. Kneeling before the woman he loves suggests an ability to learn from her and to commit himself fully to their relationship.

Throughout his fiction Gaines uses the physical act of standing as a symbolic representation of coming to manhood. In this last novel though, Gaines adds kneeling and broadens the definition of

manhood to include behaviours traditionally associated with women. In the very next scene after Grant's with Vivian, Reverend Ambrose visits a rude, unkempt, and cynical Grant in his bedroom, much as Grant has visited Jefferson in the same state in his cell. This parallel indicates that Reverend Ambrose is to be Grant's third teacher. Reverend Ambrose argues that, despite Grant's college education, he does not know himself or his own community very well. Reverend Ambrose questions Grant's manhood, in part because of the rivalry between them over whose services Jefferson needs most and because Grant refuses to cooperate with Reverend Ambrose, but also in part because Grant does not understand the role that the black church and the black community have played in creating traditions that have sustained black people in a racist society. In a scene with echoes from the one in *A Gathering of Old Men* in which Charlie asks to be called Mr Biggs, Reverend Ambrose tells Grant, 'When you act educated, I'll call you Grant. I'll even call you Mr Grant when you act like a man' (216). Because Reverend Ambrose knows of Grant's success with Jefferson, he wants Grant to ask Jefferson to kneel and pray for forgiveness in front of his godmother. But Grant does not believe in heaven or in the black church's placation of oppressed people, which he believes has had the effect of bolstering the white power structure.[34] Although Reverend Ambrose's remark, 'You think a man can't kneel and stand' (p. 216), makes Grant dig in his heels in their argument about institutionalised religion, it reverberates powerfully for the reader as regards issues of masculinity because it echoes the previous scene in which Grant kneels with his head in Vivian's lap.

A Lesson Before Dying ends with Gaines' vision that coming to manhood involves more than 'standing'. On the day that Jefferson is to be executed, Grant spends the early afternoon outside his school awaiting word of the execution. After an introspective walk through the quarters, Grant admits to himself that Reverend Ambrose is 'brave' because he is with Jefferson, and Grant fervently hopes that he has not done anything to weaken Jefferson's belief in God (p. 249). When Paul, the young white deputy, brings Grant the news the Jefferson has died with dignity, he also congratulates Grant for transforming Jefferson, 'You're one great teacher, Grant Wiggins' (p. 254). Gaines ends *A Lesson Before Dying* with Grant asking Paul to return and tell his students about Jefferson's dignity and courage. This upcoming lesson and pedagogical method will be very different from

the reading, writing, and 'rithmetic and the rote memorisation Grant has employed in the past. This change is reminiscent of the introduction to *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, in which the history teacher explains that he needs to record Miss Jane's life story because it has been left out of the history books: 'I'm sure her life's story can help me explain things to my students.'[35]

Up to this point in the novel, Grant has internalised most of his emotions except for his anger. He has held back tears for Jefferson, both tears of joy at his progress and tears of sadness at his fate. While Grant waits to hear word of the execution, he thinks, 'I felt like crying, but I refused to cry. No, I would not cry. There were too many more who would end up as he did. I could not cry for all of them, could I?' (p. 249). Grant's last action in *A Lesson Before Dying*, which is to stand before his class and to cry while telling his students of Jefferson's execution, is a powerful redefinition of masculinity that makes crying a strength. With this act, Gaines signals that Grant has finally become a man, both because he knows who he is and what he can do for his community and because he is not afraid to express his emotions. That Gaines' final portrait of Grant is similar to his portrait of Gil in *A Gathering of Old Men*, despite racial difference, suggests that Gaines thinks both black and white men must reject traditional models of manhood which link masculinity with the capacity for violence and embrace a new model which includes empathising with others, resolving conflict in non-aggressive ways, and expressing a wide range of emotions. With these final words, 'I was crying' (p. 256), Gaines has expanded the possibilities of masculine endings – in more ways than just the fictional.

Notes

I wish to thank Susan Donaldson and Michael Kimmel whose comments and questions have been helpful to my work on this article, which appeared in a slightly different form in *masculinities* 3.2 (Summer 1995): 43–66.

1. Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black/White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 11-16.

2. Ernest Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men* (New York: Random House, 1983), 15. Subsequent quotations from this novel will be identified by page number in the text.

3. Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 6-7. Subsequent quotations from this novel will be identified by page number in the text.

4. Cooper Thompson, 'A New Vision of Masculinity', in *Men's Lives*, eds Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 586-591. See *Men's Lives* for articles by Matt Groening, Joseph Pleck, Harry Brod, Bob Connell, Norm Radican, and Pip Martin, which explore new definitions of masculinity.

5. In an interview with *Washington Post* reporter Ken Ringle ('A Southern Road to Freedom') 20 July 1993, Gaines describes the contradictory nature of growing up black in rural Louisiana in the 1930s and 1940s:

> There were places I couldn't go, things I couldn't say, questions I couldn't ask. You had to work for nothing and take what they gave you. Yet at the same time, you had all the fields to run in, the river to fish in, the swamp to hunt in. ... I was freer than any white kid, and at the same time, not free at all. What a paradox. (D1)

> There's such beauty in this place. Such peace, and such beauty. As a kid here there were times I was the freest kid in the world, and times I was in de facto slavery.

6. Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 35.

7. M. Gaudet and C. Wooton, *Porch Talk with Ernest Gaines: Conversations on the Writer's Craft* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 44.

8. Clyde W. Franklin, II, 'Black Male-Black Female Conflict: Individually Caused and Culturally Nurtured', in Kimmel and Messner, eds, *Men's Lives*, 347.

9. In an editorial in the *Washington Post*, 'The Problem with Peace Movements', 17 February 1991, Arun Gandhi quotes these lines from his grandfather's letter, C7.

10. While I agree with Mary Helen Washington that the society Gaines depicts is a sexist one, I do not agree with her assessment of this scene. See Washington's review of the novel in *The Nation* ('The House That Slavery Built', 14 January 1984). She suggests that the old black men exclude Candy from their discussion because she is female, 'just another threat to manhood' (24), but I think that Candy's exclusion has more to do with the power and privilege of her race than with her sex. Notice that Candy's fiancé, Lou Dimes, who is sympathetic to the old men, is excluded as well. For once, the old men want to direct their own actions, not have them dictated by the white power structure. With the final tableau in which Candy seeks Lou Dimes's hand after Mathù has refused her offer of a ride, Gaines indicates that Candy must redefine her identity as other than a caretaker of black people.

11. Bob Connell, 'Masculinity, Violence and War', in Kimmel and Messner, eds, *Men's Lives*, 197.

12. Some readers have suggested that Gil is still prejudiced. They cite as evidence his cutting behaviour to Cal when Gil hears that a black man has killed his brother. Although he does react to Cal briefly at this point 'because of his color' (115), I think Gaines has him behave this way to depict the complexity and difficulty of overcoming the racism one has been raised with. This scene shows how stereotypes can lie latent but potent in one's con-

sciousness. In the discussion that follows among Gil and his family, Gaines makes it clear that he is no longer the bigoted young man his father raised him to be.

13. See chapters two and three in Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Wyatt-Brown argues that the harsh southern code of primal honour can be traced to the Indo-European tribes that created Homeric Greece and destroyed Rome, and he links the persistence of these archaic values in the South to 'the Southern conviction of life's transiency' (31). He identifies the following elements as 'crucial in the formulation of Southern evaluations of conduct: (1) honor as immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familial and community enemies; (2) opinion of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth; (3) physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit: (4) defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of woman; and finally, (5) reliance upon oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances', 34.

14. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 22.

15. Gaines' vision here is similar to Cooper Thompson's in 'A New Vision of Masculinity.'

16. Williamson, *A Rage for Order,* 182. See chapters four and five in Joel Williamson's *A Rage for Order*. The turn-of-the-century decades were an incredibly violent time in southern history; a dramatic rise in the numbers of lynchings of black men and in riots against black people occurred in cities such as Wilmington, New Orleans, and Atlanta. Williamson states that whereas before the 1890s lynching had been a 'Western and all-white phenomenon, often having to do with bands of cattle rustlers', in the 1890s lynching became a southern practice with black victims: 'In the decade of the 1890s, 82 percent of the nation's lynchings took place in fourteen Southern states. In the three decades from 1889 to 1918, that proportion increased to 88 percent. ... In 1892 the number peaked at 156' (84).

17. Williamson, *A Rage for Order,* 98-99. See Thomas F. Gossett's *Race: The History of an Idea in America*, (Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963) for a discussion of the 'scholarly' articles which articulated the racist ideas that Dixon popularised.

18. James Riener, 'Rereading American Literature from a Men's Studies Perspective: Some Implications' in *The Making of Masculinities*, ed Harry Brod (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987) 292.

19. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, which takes place a generation earlier than *A Gathering of Old Men* (during the time period that the old men speak of in their oral histories) Gaines actualises the legitimate fears of black people, such as Jefferson, who could not get fair trials in the white criminal justice system and who were swiftly sent to the electric chair. In an interview with Ken Ringle, Gaines reveals that *A Lesson Before Dying* 'is the product of a lifetime of nightmares about execution.' Ringle writes that 'It is not, he says, that he is a particular zealot against capital punishment, just that he has long been obsessed with wondering what it must be like to know in advance the exact moment one is going to die (D2). Gaines' obsession is surely fed by the number of executions which took place in the South when he was growing up, the time period in which he sets this novel.

20. Riener, 'Rereading American Literature', 292.

21. Gaudet and Wooton, *Porch Talk,* 118.

22. Ibid., 97.

23. Ibid., 97.

24. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 19.

25. Gaudet and Wooton, *Porch Talk,* 98.

26. Peter Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 111.

27. Gaudet and Wooton, *Porch Talk,* 97.

28. Here I use Rachel Blau DuPlessis' phrase and her theories about the endings of women's narratives in *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) to help me think about the endings of men's narratives.

29. Thompson, *A New Vision,* 586.

30. Ringle, *A Southern Road,* D2.

31. In an interview with Gaudet and Wooton, Gaines spoke about Hemingway's relevance for black readers and for himself as a writer, 'I've always said to students, especially black students, that somehow I feel that Hemingway was writing more about blacks than he was, really, about whites when he was using the grace-under-pressure theme. I see that Hemingway usually puts his people in a moment where they must have grace under pressure, and I've often looked at black life not only as a moment, but more as something constant, everyday. This is what my characters must come through' (*Porch Talk,* 22).

32. Gaines wonders if he had not left the South and gone to school in California where his writing talents were nurtured if he would have become an embittered teacher who hates the world for not offering him the opportunity to write (Gaudet and Wooton, *Porch Talk,* 48). In his fiction Gaines vacillates in his depictions of teachers: from the flattering portrait of Jackson's former teacher, Madame Bayonne in *Catherine Carmier,* who is the only person at Jackson's homeplace that understands his frustrations and desires, to the unflattering portraits of Grant's teacher, Matthew Antoine, and the apolitical teachers in *In My Father's House* (1978) who have lost interest in the civil rights movement. Gaines' portrait of Grant at the end of the novel, however, seems to combine the heroism of other black male characters who are social activists, such as those in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman* (1971) and his other fiction, with the duties of teaching, thus broadening the definition of both teacher and activist.

33. Grant's fears about remaining in the South resemble Richard Wright's as expressed in *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945). Both protagonists resist white definitions of black inferiority, both recognise the power of these constructions of black identity, and both feel it is chance that has kept them from becoming the 'nigger' they were supposed to be. However, while Wright ends his autobiographical narrative with leaving the South so that he can 'understand' the South (228), Gaines has Grant stay to try to change it. Thus, in some respects, Gaines rewrites Wright's ending and revises Wright's vision of black manhood, which is premised on solitude and repudiation of community and region. Gaines is writing fifty years later - after political and social change has occurred in the South and after Gaines himself has returned to Louisiana to teach creative writing there for one semester each year.

34. The exchange that Reverend Ambrose and Grant have mirrors Gaines' own ambivalence to organised religion, which surfaces in his portrayals of less than admirable ministers in his other novels, such as Reverend Jameson in *A Gathering of Old Men,* who is the only old man reluctant to stand up for Mathu.

35. Ernest J. Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), v.