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Confronting Manhood: The Struggle of Male Characters in the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of English

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

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Keywords: Ernest J. Gaines, manhood, Black Masculinity

ABSTRACT

Confronting Manhood: The Struggle of Male Characters in Ernest J. Gaines's Fiction

by

Katie Fay

This study examines the African-American author Ernest Gaines's three works "The Sky is Gray," *In My Father's House*, and *A Lesson before Dying* as examples of oppressed manhood, and the gradual acceptance of the characteristics of manhood in Black males. Chapter One focuses on "The Sky Is Gray" and follows the young hero as he makes his transition from child to a young man understanding manhood. The second chapter looks at *In My Father's House*, exploring the relationship between father and son. Due to his father's abandonment, the son never learns what it means to be a man. However, at the same time his son is struggling to discover his manhood, the father finally becomes a man. Finally, chapter three centers on *A Lesson before Dying*, showing two males can learn manhood from each other. Although both are oppressed, together they achieve the manhood that is being robbed from them.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Throughout his public writing, Ernest Gaines has been consistently asked about the themes of his novels and short stories. Because of his desire to express Black manhood, interviewers and critics have recognized Gaines as a current fiction voice for African American men. In a 1990 interview with Marcia Gaudet, Gaines addressed this trend, saying, "I think I know more about the black male because I am male myself. I know something about his dreams. I listened to them when I was a kid growing up, I've drunk with him, I've been in the army and athletics-I know what men dream about. All men dream about certain things. All men have hopes…" (43). Gaines's decision to address the struggle of Black males begins in his own experience as a man and expands to include the dreams of all men. Gaines feels he needs to address the Black male struggle because he has lived it and anticipated a better life for both himself and the other Black men he encountered.

Gaines's desire to tell the stories of males becoming men begins in his childhood on a Louisiana plantation and continues into his young adulthood. As a child in the South being raised by sharecroppers, Gaines experienced firsthand many of the situations his characters undergo. Because his family still lived on the plantation where the older generations were forced into slavery, as a child he was exposed to racism, lack of education, poverty, and the remnants of plantation life. When Gaines lived on the plantation he was constantly exposed to harsh living conditions, hard labor, and destitution. Once Gaines left the South and began his writing career, he was able to share

the stories of his childhood through his characters. But more importantly, Gaines was able to share the hardships that he saw young black men endure. Because he was raised in a society of historical racial division, Gaines saw the demoralization of men both in his generation and the older generation before him. In his fiction, particularly "The Sky Is Gray," *In My Father's House*, and *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines represents in his males not just the struggles he saw in the South, but the struggles many young African American males feel trying to find their manhood in a society that dominates them.

Ernest Gaines was born on January 15, 1933, in a small south Louisiana town of Oscar in Pointe Coupee Parish. Like five generations of his family before him, Gaines spent his childhood on the River Lake Plantation in the old slave quarters. During World War II both Gaines's mother and stepfather moved to California, leaving him to be reared by his Aunt Augusteen. In his adulthood, Gaines continues to praise his aunt and stresses the influence she had on him and his literary characters. Crippled since birth, Gaines's aunt could not work the fields like the other women on the plantation, but she would stay busy cleaning the house and fulfilling other domestic responsibilities while raising Gaines and his siblings. Reflecting on his aunt, Gaines told Tom Carter, "My aunt never felt sorry for herself. And the people did not feel sorry for her. She had a great moral strength. I know the kind of burden she carried trying to raise us and I feel any character I wrote about has to have a burden" (82). Like his aunt, many of Gaines's male characters have a great moral strength. However, it is smothered by the society in which they live, and it becomes their responsibility to unearth their manhood and their strength.

When he was not working the fields, Gaines attended school in a one-room church in the quarters and then a Catholic school for African-Americans that educated

black youth through seventh grade. Like many of his male children characters, the school year for Gaines, and other Black children, corresponded with the crop season. Gaines often tells stories of going to school with no desks, old books, no toilet, and a superintendent who came twice a year. Because there was no high school for Black children on or around his plantation, Gaines decided to leave the South and move to California to join his mother and stepfather. While in California, Gaines visited a public library for the first time and fell in love with literature. Gaines often shares this experience with other writers telling them, "I discovered the Russians, Turgenev, Gogol who spoke of peasants. Then the French, Flaubert, Maupassant, Zola. But no one was telling the story of my people. Thus, as a teenager, I decided to write" (Gaudet 6). Gaines enjoyed the stories of these minority authors because he could identify with their struggle. His childhood in Louisiana exposed him to harsh conditions of life and the unfair treatment towards Black males. Gaines successfully tells the Black male's story because of this experience in the library as well as his belief that all men have dreams and desires to be more than expected of them.

When Gaines made the decision to write about his life and people that he knew living in the South, he began to tell his childhood stories and occurrences through his characters. Like his own childhood on a Louisiana plantation, Gaines's stories take place in an imaginary plantation region named Bayonne. Gaines tells Gregory Fitzgerald, "I went into the fields when I was about the age of eight, or maybe nine. I think my first job was picking potatoes. So, by the time I left for California, I knew a lot about the work and life on a plantation" (7). In his novels, Gaines draws upon his own experiences in the South, as well as stories he heard or other people he met as a child. He tells the hardships

of people because of plantation life. Although there was no more slavery, Gaines saw daily its effects in his life because his family was still suppressed living on the old plantation. Likewise, his characters live the effects of southern plantation life and must overcome many of the same daily hardships to become men.

In August of 1963, the *Negro Digest* published one of Gaines's first short stories, "The Sky is Gray." Told in the voice of a young boy, it follows the boy and his mother on a journey to the city to get the boy's tooth removed. While on the journey James, who bears Gaines's own middle name, begins to understand his mother's desires for him to become a man not only through her instructions and insistence for manhood, but also through his own experience of racism. In a 1986 interview, Gaines tells William Parrill of his own experience as a young child traveling to the city to see a dentist for a toothache. Like James, Gaines also began to feel racism as he rode the bus into town. He tells Parrill, "Much of what little James goes through…I went through. I did have a toothache as a child, we had to ride in the back of the bus in the mid-forties, we could not eat up-town, we could not walk in a place to get warm or anything like that, and his mother was somewhat like my mother" (182). In addition to the tooth incident, much of what James undergoes in the short story is based on Gaines's childhood in Louisiana. The story is set on a small plantation where the women care for James and his brothers since his father is at war. The survival skills that James learns at the beginning of the story, leading to his discovery of manhood, are also based on Gaines's experiences caring for his brothers and sisters. He tells Parrill, "I had to kill birds in order to eat, and I am the oldest of the family, so I had to look after my younger brothers and sisters. I went through all of that in a period of say ten years, but I crowded all of that into his life in a

period of a daytime" (182). James's experiences are all shaped by Gaines's own trials as a child. However, Gaines is quick to emphasize that James is not Gaines, but the symbol of all male children as they try to understand what it means to be a man.

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

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

audience's reaction to the novel is similar to the pain Gaines experienced while creating the characters. The story reminds his audience that a man is more than a father. He is an individual that must learn about his own manhood before he can successfully reach his children.

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

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

The Black male's deflation of manhood began in Africa. Robbed from a patriarchal society and forced into slavery, the Black male left Africa with a main essence of his culture, family, stolen from him. After suffering the boat ride to America under horrific conditions the Black male became a commodity to White society. Because the White males knew the Black males could manage the heavy labor, and succeed at it more than women, every physical aspect of the Black male could be scrutinized by White society whenever they wished. His body, face, teeth, hands and much more were carefully inspected to evaluate his capability to work long hours in the fields. No longer important as an individual, the Black male became a body that could be bought and sold

to reap profit. Clyde Franklin II writes of the Black male's arrival into America, "Uprooted from their country, their tribes, their families, these males and those who followed were taken to various Southern port cities, auctioned off like cattle, and enslaved for the duration of their lives" (4). It was during the continued auctions that the Black male's loss of manhood was truly felt. He had established himself as a man in Africa by caring for his family, following his tribal religion, and becoming a model for other Black youth to emulate. In Africa, the Black male was mentally strong and physically domineering. But in America, his worth was determined by only his labor.

The White male succeeded in forcing manhood out of the Black male's memory by demeaning his work and role as a man. While working the White male's field, the male slave acquired no benefits from his labor. Instead, he would watch daily the White male receive financial gain because of his work. At the same time, he was subjected to periodic beatings, lynching, and watched as his women were sexually and physically abused. Unable to fulfill the instinct to protect his woman, the Black male was mortified and developed a sense of self-loathing. His self-esteem was further challenged while watching his children suffer. Like his woman, the Black male could offer no comfort as his children were forced into hard labor and also subjected to beating and sexual abuse. Robert Staples writes of this experience, "The African male saw his masculinity challenged by the rape of his women, the sale of his children, the rations issued in the name of the woman and children bearing her name, while his presence went unrecognized" (2). All the power the Black male held in Africa was taken from him in America. Not only could he not protect his wife and children, but his very existence was

taken from him. The Black male became not only a laborer, but a means to continue to produce workers for the field without the importance of family or fatherhood.

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

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

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

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

At the same time, younger Black males rarely had examples of true fatherhood. Because they were separated by slavery, fathers and sons lacked the connection needed to teach and learn manhood. When they received their freedom, these young Black males began to seek out their fathers and either never found them or were disappointed at the relationship that could never be formed properly to redeem years of separation. In an

interview with Doyle, Ernest Gaines expanded on this idea, saying, “The father and son were separated when they were brought to this country over three centuries ago. The white man did not let them come together during slavery, and they have not been able to reach each other since” (Lowe 163). Because of years of slavery and dehumanization of Black males, father and son relationships were never built on a firm foundation. The new generation continued in the same cycle as the previous slave generation because of society’s treatment of them and the lack of foundation of manhood. Like their predecessors, these new generations of Black males were confused about their own manhood and escaped their confusion with anger, lack of education, and hostility.

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

Chapter two explores Gaines’s short story “The Sky Is Gray.” It is important to begin with this short story not only to establish Gaines’s theme of manhood in his earlier fiction, but also to show that Gaines sees potential in all of his male characters, even the

young children. This chapter will follow chronologically Gaines's story showing James, the main character, progresses throughout the story until he understands how to become a man. This progression includes his understanding of sacrifice and provision, finding a man to model, and understanding the concept of work for money.

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

Finally, chapter four examines Gaines's recent novel *A Lesson before Dying* as two males discovering their manhood through each other. Unlike *In My Father's House*, the two males are able to work together and teach each other that manhood can be achieved in every situation, whether on a plantation or on death row. It is important to conclude with this chapter to show the progression in Gaines' novels. He begins with a child and moves through a father that fails to teach his son how to be a man before he dies and barely recognizes his own manhood, to a positive novel that has two men supporting each other. The final chapter will show that Gaines not only wishes his characters to find the manhood being taught to them, but he ultimately desires his male

characters to learn from, and support each other, on the journey to reconcile the past and prepare for the future.

CHAPTER 2

A CHILD BECOMES A MAN

Ernest Gaines's theme of suppressed manhood begins in one of his earliest short stories, "The Sky Is Gray." At the beginning of the story, the young boy James tries to conceal a sore tooth so as not to upset his mother. Almost immediately the mother learns of James' tooth and the two of them venture together to Baton Rouge to visit a dentist. During their journey, James begins to understand the role his mother wishes him to fulfill. Because his father is not present, his mother is raising James and his brothers, teaching them that manhood is reachable. Although there is no model of manhood at home, James discovers one while in town and learns that a real man listens to his own thoughts and not the opinions of a White society that is trying to oppress the Black manhood. By the end of the story, James' mother reassures him that he is a man, and he returns to the plantation with the knowledge that a true man protects and provides for his family.

Gaines opens his short story with eight-year-old James and his mother waiting for the bus. In the opening sentences it becomes clear that although James is still a child he feels a need to be a leader in his family. Gaines writes, "Go'n be coming in a few minutes. Coming round that bend down there full speed. And I'm go'n get out my handkerchief and wave it down, and we go'n get on it and go" (83). James is ready to stop the bus if his mother stops looking. He understands that the bus is coming to take them to fix his tooth, and he is prepared to get the bus's attention if necessary. The two are waiting for some time for the bus and James is anxious, but he knows that his mother has turned her attention away from the coming road and is looking behind her. Gaines

writes, “I keep looking on for it, but Mama don’t look that way no more” (83). Already as a child, James knows that he must fulfill any responsibility that his mother has turned away from. At the same time, James does not yet understand the role he will fulfill when he becomes a man. He wants to protect and provide for his mother, but does not know how to do so. Melissa Baab summarizes James’ transition from this moment to the end of the story as a movement from innocence to awareness (22). James’ innocence as he waits for the bus while his mother becomes distracted foreshadows the responsibility that James continues to show in the story, which will increase as he begins to understand the need to always fulfill the calling responsibility to become a man.

While James waits for the bus, his mother becomes anxious, thinking of the family at home. The relationship between James and his mother develops as the two continue to wait. Gaines writes, “I’ve been with Mama so much, just me and her, I know what she’s thinking all the time” (83). James begins to describe what his mother is concerned about, her home, children, warmth, and food. The relationship between mother and son begins to deepen as James recites his mother’s list of worries. By this point in the story there has been no mention of James’ father, but we later learn that he has left the family because he is in the army. However, James’ mother is teaching him to fulfill the role his father would play in the family. He is aware of his mother’s thoughts and uncertainties, which shows he has listened into adult conversations. Still a child, James knows his mother’s concern for her family to provide for them. In addition, he is confident that he can ease her worries saying, “She don’t worry too much if she leave me there with the smaller ones, ‘cause she know I’m go’n look after them and look after Auntie and everything else. I’m the oldest and she say I’m the man” (84). James knows

the concerns his mother has for the family. Still a young child, James wishes to help his mother in any way she needs. James becomes confident of his abilities because he desires to assist his mother and carry some of her worries.

Although James does not yet understand what his mother means when she says he is "the man." James is proud and confident that he can protect his mother. In the next line he says, "I look at my mama and I love my mama" (84). All James knows at the beginning of the story is he loves his mother. Because of that love, he feels the instinct to shield her and listens when she tells him he is a man. As the story's opening progresses, it becomes more evident that James' mother is trying to teach her son what it means when she tells him that he is a man. As James continues to look at his mama while they wait in the cold for the bus, he notices that she looks sad. He wants to put his arm around her to show his love and make her happy, but he resists saying, " She say that's weakness and that's crybaby stuff and she don't want no crybaby round her. She don't want you to be scared, either" (84). Frank Shelton comments on this incident: "Concerned for her son's manhood, the mother wants to teach him the strength to endure and function constructively" (205). James' mother is aware of what it takes to be a man. She is familiar with the struggles that young Black males endure, and she is preparing James at his young age. She knows the oppression James will have to overcome, at times without emotion. If James is able to be indifferent to White opinion, he will not only save himself from pain, but become stronger. James' mother prepares James to be stoic now, so he will be able to reach his manhood sooner than other males that never learn or ignore the early steps to become a man.

After James remembers what his has mother told him about weakness, he demonstrates that he is not cowardly and that he has listened to his mother. Because Gaines is writing in the voice of a child, all of James' emotions are exposed in a simple, matter-of-fact voice. James wants to show that he is always brave as his mother tells him to be, but he must be honest too admitting that he is scared of the dark and ghosts. However, he remembers what his mother tells him about weakness and refuses to admit to his family when he is scared, again showing that he is developing into the man his mother wishes him to be. Similarly, James' mother wants to show all of her sons that being a man is being brave, but the younger boys are not yet ready to respond to the mother's lesson as James is. Ty, the younger child, still cries in the dark and is scared of ghosts. But if he cries, his mother whips him. James knows that if he does what his mother tells him and stays brave, he is showing his younger brother that his mother is right. He says, "I'm scared of the dark too, but I make 'tend I ain't. I make 'tend I ain't 'cause I'm the oldest, and I got to set a good sample for the rest. I can't ever be scared and I can't ever cry" (84). James is simply doing what his mother has told him to do, but he still does not understand why. This is seen in the way James repeats his mothers' words, but does not get them exactly right, for instance saying "sample" instead of "example." He realizes that to make his mother happy he must stay brave and model respectable behavior for his younger brother, but James does not yet grasp the reality that being brave, and staying strong, that leads to manhood.

In spite of his lack of recognition, James still fulfills his mother's wishes and stays courageous when his tooth becomes sore. He does not want to tell his mother in fear of her response, but more so because he knows it will cost money and hurt the family if

he admits that his tooth needs pulled. James says, "It's been hurting me and hurting me close to a month now, but I never said it. I didn't say it 'cause I didn't want to act like a crybaby, and 'cause I know we didn't have enough money to go have it pulled. But, Lord, it been hurting me" (84). Like before, James is aware of his mother's financial worries. Already as a child, James realizes that to care for a family means sacrifice and economic stability. James knows that if he admits that his tooth needs pulling, then it would be a burden on his family. So, for some time he disguises his toothache by trying to distract himself and telling only his little brother Ty. At night, James lies in bed trying to ignore the pain in his tooth and refusing to open his mouth so the cold air can not make the pain worse. As he lays there, James' fear of hurting his family is further emphasized as he listens to them sleep. He states, "I'd just lay there and listen to them snore. Ty there, right 'side of me, and Auntie and Val over by the fireplace…Mama sleeps round the other side with Louis and Walker. I'd just lay there and listen to them, and listen to that wind out there, and listen to that fire in the fireplace" (84). James' foundation to be a father has already been laid by his mother. He is only eight, but he already wants to sacrifice his health to keep the children warm from the outside wind. James believes his mother when she tells him he is a man, and he wants to accomplish the steps his mother lays out for him to become a man, even if he must suffer with a sore tooth.

As much as James tries to hide his problem from his family, except Ty, his Auntie eventually discovers that he is in pain. Initially James tries to lie to his aunt, showing again that he feels responsibility to protect his family, especially the women. James' aunt wants to tell his mother, but James tells her not to, "'Cause I knowed we didn't have any money, and it just was go'n make her mad again" (85). James puts his mother's feelings

before his own pain, which again demonstrates that he has the understanding to become a man. Wanting to please his aunt and avoid telling his mother, James agrees to see his aunt's friend Monsieur Bayonne hoping he will cure the tooth. James' interaction with Monsieur Bayonne differs from his interaction with the women in his family. James is honest with Monsieur and admits that he is in pain. Even during the prayers the two say together James is not able to lie or hide the truth from Monsieur, but tells him that his tooth is still hurting. However, wanting to please his family James becomes convinced that his tooth has stopped hurting and he leaves to play with the hounds in the woods. While in the woods, James and his brother corner a small rabbit to take back for dinner. Again James assumes the role of provider for his family and puts his needs in the background. He is still in pain, but hides his pain under the guise of religious healing and captures dinner for his family.

The next day after Monsieur Bayonne fails to heal James, James' mother tells him they are going to town. James' first reaction is to continue to lie to protect and thus provide for his family. He tells his mother, "It ain't hurting me now more. I can eat anything on it" (86), but she insists that they will go and remove the rotten tooth. The morning before mother and son leave for the bus, James listens to his aunt and mother talking of their finances. It is clear now that James is aware of his family's funds but he has yet to learn exactly what this talk means. When it appears that the two women may know he is listening, James pretends to still be asleep because, "I didn't want them to know I was listening" (87). James may possess the knowledge of money, but he knows he is not yet mature enough to handle financial decisions and stress. It is a part of life that he is not prepared for. Yes, he knows that his tooth costs money and he possesses that

desire to sacrifice his own well-being for his family, but he does not fully comprehend that when he becomes a man he must provide and distribute the money. At this point in his journey, James knows that monetary discussions should be left to his mother and aunt and do not include him.

After a brief background of James' tooth and the methods uses to avoid going to the dentist, Gaines brings his readers again to the bus stop where James is watching for the bus. As James grows more impatient for the bus to arrive he remembers another lesson his mother taught him, "She don't like you to say something for nothing" (88). As James avoids breaking his mother's instruction his mind begins to wander to different animals he has eaten. Eventually he says, "…and I done ate redbirds, too. I didn't want kill the redbirds, but she made me kill them…. Me and Ty was go'n play with them and let them go, but she made me kill them 'cause we needed the food" (89). James then plays the entire episode of killing the birds over again in his mind. James does not understand why his mother insists that he kills the birds, particularly because he keeps insisting that he can not do it. The more James refuses to kill the bird, the angrier his mother becomes. She slaps James twice until he eventually takes the fork and breaks the bird's leg, but pulls back when he realizes he has hurt the bird. James' mother relents enough to show him how to kill one bird, by stabbing it through its neck, then tells him, "That's one. Get the other one" (89). James' mother refuses to let him leave the situation without hardening his heart and killing the bird. In the same way that she does not allow James to hug her, his mother does not want him to become emotional over animals that are needed for food. Baab comments, "Concerned that James be able to take care of himself and his family should the need arise, she knows she must teach him that

subsistence is more important than the sentiment he holds for the birds" (25). James' mother is laying a foundation for James to learn to become a man. She is teaching him responsibility and sacrifice. Although he is still a child and may not fully understand her means, as he matures through the story James comes to a realization that he must sacrifice to provide.

The more James hesitates and cries not to kill the bird, the angrier his mother becomes. Eventually, she becomes frustrated that he refuses to accept the responsibility of provider and begins to whip him. James' aunt interrupts the punishment saying, "Explain to him. Just don't beat him. Explain to him" (90). As the two women in James' life, they know the responsibilities he must endure to reach his full potential as a Black male in the South. One main obstacle he must overcome is feeding his family when there is no money and no way to earn that money. James' mother becomes angry with James as she continues to whip him, showing her frustration not with him; but with the system that makes her teach her young children how to be men. After reminiscing James says, "I'm still young, I ain't no more than eight; but I know now; I know why I had to do it" (90). Although James makes this statement the young child in him is seen in the next line, "They were so little, though. They were so little" (90). James wants to follow his mother, but he is still young and still has the instinct to cry and say the birds are little rather than see them as food. However, James' progression to manhood is seen in his realization that his mother wants him to be a provider. He says, "Suppose she had to go away? That's why I had to do it. Suppose she had to go away like Daddy went away? Then who was go'n look after us? They had to be somebody left to carry on. I didn't know it then, but I know it now" (90). The foundation has been laid for James to learn throughout the story

the characteristics of a mature man. He is ready for the journey and continues to learn as he enters the city.

Eventually, the bus comes and James does as promised and flags his handkerchief for the bus to stop. Immediately, racism confronts James as he passes “the little sign that say ‘White’ and ‘Colored’ (91). James waits for his mother to come to the back of the bus, saving the last seat for her. However, he does notice the empty seats in the front, “but I know I can’t sit there, ‘cause I have to sit back of the sign” (91). These beginning signs of racism will only increase as James arrives in Baton Rouge. However, like many other experiences he will not fully understand his mother’s behavior as she struggles to find them places to sit, eat, stay warm, and even find a dentist. Gaines comments on this theme in his story saying, “So when you say slavery ended one hundred thirty years ago, that wall is still there, that law is still there…there are many of those walls that are still there, invisible walls to most people, but they’re still there” (Sartisky 258). Part of James’ progression to manhood is his recognition, and later, rejection of racism. James already knows the role of the Black male in society and the subjection by White males, but later he learns to rise above the stereotypes to become a man.

These “ walls,” as Gaines describes them, continue to confront James as he gets off the bus and starts walking to the dentist. Throughout his walk, his mother tries to show him how to behave towards racism if he wants to become a man. First, they pass a school with White children playing in the yard, then a café with people eating. James comments, “I wish I was in there ‘cause I’m cold. Mama tells me to keep my eyes in front where they belong” (93). Like a child, James is easily distracted by his surroundings and looks at the children and the people in the café, but his mother is quick

to remind him that to be strong in the South during this time he must not stare or draw attention to himself. James' confusion is heightened as he passes the courthouse and sees the flag waving there. He says, "This flag ain't like the one we got at school. This one here ain't got but a handful of stars. One at school got a big pile of stars-one for every state" (93). Although James does not comprehend why this flag is different than the one he is used to, it is an important moment for him because the racism he sees during his walk is summarized through this flag. He does not know it yet, but his mother has taught him important lessons as they walk to avoid confrontation that may make him question his manhood. On their walk, James' mother builds for him a foundation that is built upon when he goes into the dentist office. This foundation has shows him that racism is obviously prevalent, but he can turn away from it and still become a man despite the attempts to demoralize his character and make him a lesser human than the Southern Whites.

James and his mother arrive at the dentist's office to find there is a long wait to see the dentist. As they watch other children being called a woman begins to talk to James' mother about the children who suffer when they come to the dentist office. She says, "Looks like it's the poor that suffers the most. I don't understand it" (95). Reminding everyone in the office that there is no other choice than to see the dentist they are seeing, she then comments, "He's not a good dentist, Dr. Robillard is much better. But more expensive. That's why most of the colored people come here. The white people go to Dr. Robillard" (95). The racism that James sees first in the city increases in the dentist office. There is a separation not only in the offices, but in the skill of the dentists. James' mother is forced to take her son to the less-skilled doctor because she is poor and

Black. She has to wait for her son to be seen in the office with no reassurance of a specific time, or that he will be seen at all.

When the woman in the office makes the comment about the dentist, another man joins the conversation, saying, “That’s the trouble with the black people in this country today. We don’t question is exactly our problem. We should question and question and question--question everything” (95). James describes the man as looking, “like a teacher or somebody that goes to college. He’s got on a suit, and he’s got a book that he’s been reading” (95). When the man begins to speak the base James’ mother has established earlier begins to be built upon. There is a voice that James is attracted to and he listens as the young man tells his audience to question every action and motive. However, at the same time there is an older black preacher that James believes does not like “that boy with that book” (95). The office becomes the setting for an argument between two opposing movements in the South. The preacher is part of the older generation that accepts life the way it is and urges others to find their faith and peace with God to avoid confrontation. The younger man is the new generation that urges education and questioning of White authority. But when the young man tells the preacher to question God as well, the preacher’s anger becomes more evident making James comment, “You can see he’s getting madder and madder. But mad or no mad, the boy ain’t thinking about him. He looks at the preacher just‘s hard ‘s the preacher looks at him” (96). James sees the confidence of the young man and is instantly attracted to it. The student refuses to turn away from the preacher, hence refusing to turn away from his belief that the black man can question his role in society. James’ mother attempts to teach him this role, but when he actually sees it in the young man, he finds the answers to his curiosity and

questions. He knows now why his mother does not want him to look in the café or the schoolyard. The ideals of those people are different than the ones she wants James to follow. James must be a man despite the separation and racism that surrounds him.

The gap between the two generations continues to grow as the man challenges the preacher's faith. The preacher directs his anger not only at the young man but more so at the attributes of the generation the man is proud to be of. The preacher tells the younger man, "Is this what they coming to? Is this what we educating them for?" (96). This comment angers the young man, who not only ridicules the preacher for his belief in God but leads him to emphasize the belief that the longer the preacher believes in God, the longer he will be subject to White males. He tells the preacher, "And as long as you listen to what your heart tells you, you will have only what the white man gives you and nothing more. Me, I don't listen to my heart. The purpose of the heart is to pump blood throughout the body and nothing else" (96). James is learning from the young man that he must use his mind over his emotions. This control of emotions is similar to James' mother earlier lesson with the birds. Just as she wants to teach her son survival over emotions, the young man exemplifies it for James. James now sees a man that fulfills his mother's lessons. He sees a man that refuses to accept White society's instruction and belief by surviving with his mind.

As their argument continues, the preacher tries to make excuses for the young man's attitude. He asks him where his father and mother are, why he is mad at the world, and why he has no faith in God. Eventually, the argument becomes deeper than philosophical issues by coming to represent the manhood of each generation. The older generation seems to accept the role that White society wants them to play. The preacher

has faith in God that allows him not to question the treatment of the poor in the office and the racism that James passes on his way to the dentist. He feels threatened not only by the younger man's education, but more so by the fact that he questions the existence of God, the one belief the preacher leans on for answers in the confusing world he lives in. As the preacher begins to lose the argument with the young man, he shakes his head, and people in the room avoid eye contact with him and the young man. However, James cannot turn away from the scene. He says, "I kind of look 'way myself, but soon's I know he done turned his head, I look that way again" (97). It is important for James to watch the struggle between the two generations because it will help define himself as a man. He is attracted to the younger man because he is encouraging James to turn away from the racism he encounters as he walks and form his own belief system and education values. James sees the preacher's passive faith and his resolution to remain quiet and accept the beliefs others teach him. However, by watching the student James is introduced to a complete different world view. He sees a man who possesses an active worldliness during opposition. The student knows what he believes and why he believes it. He does not let any other person, especially White males, tell him what he should accept as truth but rather defines it through his interaction with the world.

As the preacher begins to realize that there will be no resolution with the young man he tells him that he is sorry for him. The student brings the attention away from him and back to the whole community saying, "Why? Why not be sorry for yourself? Why are you so much better than I am? Why aren't you sorry for these people in here? Why not be sorry for the lady who had to drag her child into the dentist office….Be sorry for them. Not for me. Some way or other I'm going to make it" (97). The young man has

confidence that he will succeed because he feels he has reached his manhood. He has overcome stereotypes and found education that leads him to believe that he does not need to be controlled by the White society in which he lives. He ends his argument with the preacher by questioning the latter's manhood, saying "You believed in God because a man told you to believe in God. A white man told you to believe in God. And why? To keep you ignorant so he can keep his feet on your neck" (97). The young student will not tolerate ignorance of any kind, especially from a man's claim to religion. Unlike the older preacher, the young student educates himself and keeps himself prideful, so White society cannot oppress him.

When the boy calls the preacher ignorant because of his religion, he tells the preacher that his manhood has never been reached. The preacher has no confidence or belief except what the white society tells him to have. Angry at the younger generation that questions the decisions of the previous one, the preacher gets up and walks over to the boy, telling him to stand so he can slap him across the face. James observes, "Preacher just hauls back and hit him in the face. The boy falls back 'gainst the wall, but he straightens himself up and looks right back at the preacher. 'You forgot the other cheek' he says" (98). When the preacher turns to leave the young man assures him one last time that nothing has changed by simply telling him, "That hasn't changed a thing" (98). The young man knows that the preacher's slap is for more than just him. It is for the new generation that questions everything including religion. The preacher leaves the office after the incident, but glances back one last time as he leaves. The glance is more curiosity than conclusion. The young man possesses a drive that has been beaten out of the preacher. The preacher lives his life based on the faith the white society teaches him,

whereas, the young student has made the decision to be more. He has educated himself and refuses to believe in the ideologies that are imposed upon him as a Black male child. By wiping the blood from his mouth after being slapped, the young man is wiping away the arguments that the preacher tries to bombard him with. The young man becomes an example for manhood to James. Because his father is not present, the young man is the first male James encounters in the story that has reached his manhood. This encounter sparks an interest in James that he feels compelled to examine and imitate.

After witnessing the incident with the preacher and the young student, James returns to his original thoughts of protecting his mother. Although James is getting tired waiting for the dentist he refuses to go to sleep in case he misses his name being called. As in to the opening scene of watching for the bus, James gives his attention to the nurse in case his mother forgets to listen or falls asleep. In doing so, James is again developing his manhood by placing his mother's needs before his own. This is further emphasized as James studies his mother, saying, "I love my mama. I love my mama, and when cotton come I'm go'n get her a new coat. And I ain't go'n get a black one, either. I think I'm go'n get her a red one" (99). By wishing for his mother's happiness even if just with a coat, James is mirroring his earlier actions by assuming the role of the provider. Similar to his experience with the birds, James is realizing his role to provide for his mother. This idea is slightly different and matured now because James realizes that he must work to buy his mother the coat. Even more, the color he chooses emphasizes his growth. He does not want to get his mother any coat, but a bright red coat. James wants people to see and admire his mother because they notice the coat and know its cost. James publicly

provides for his mother if he buys the coat because everyone will know that he is successful and can afford such a coat.

As James and his mother continue to wait for the dentist, his attention returns to the young student in the waiting room. Another woman begins to talk to the student and questions his earlier interaction with the preacher. However, immediately before her questioning James begins to imitate the student. He asks his mother if she would like him to read from a book, just like the young man has been doing. He then comments about the young man, "When I grow up I want to be just like him. I want clothes like that and I want keep a book with me, too" (100). Baab states: "His bearing teaches James that a man can quietly assert his point and maintain his dignity, and James now considers education as a viable means of escaping the demeaning confines of his environment" (26). By observing the young man and the preacher, James has found someone to emulate. He sees a grown man that has reached his potential through education and has found a way to express his manhood. No longer just reliant on his mother's teachings, James has progressed while in the office learning from another man.

Eventually, as the day wears on, the dentist refuses to see any more patients that morning. James and his mother are forced to walk the streets while they wait for the dentist office to open again. As before, James is confronted with racism as he looks into White stores and cafes. While on the street, James has another opportunity to show his growth towards manhood. As they are walking a man whistles at James' mother, an obvious disrespectful gesture towards women. James says, "I look back and I feel like hitting him in the mouth. If I was bigger, I say; if I was bigger, you'd see" (104). These comments show once again that James is on the verge of manhood. He knows that he

wants to protect and provide for his mother, but yet he recognizes that he is still not big enough. Like his limited knowledge of money, James also has a limited view of protection. To protect his mother is to turn and strike someone. However, the drive towards violence overrides his mother's teachings to avoid confrontation, so as to not call attention to the situation. James still needs to learn and listen to his mother although he has already begun his maturation.

The longer James is forced to wait for the dentist by walking the streets the colder he becomes. However, he listens to his mother's earlier words and refuses to complain or even tell her that he is cold. In addition, he does not want to admit to his mother that he is hungry because he feels that he is the cause for their being in the city and having to be outside in the snow. He says, "I ain't just hungry, but I'm cold too. I'm so hungry and cold I want to cry" (106). But he does not cry, rather he listens to his mother's words and refuses any of that "crybaby stuff." In the midst of his own suffering, James returns his attention to his mother and resumes his role as the wishful provider. Like while in the dentist office James says, "When summer come I'm go'n pick plenty cotton and get her a coat. I'm go'n get her a red one" (107). James' wishes for his mother far exceed his own desires for warmth and food. Although he is suffering while he walks, he is able to turn his mind away from his own struggle and focus on his mother and the wishes he has for her to improve her life in whatever ways possible.

James further emphasizes his desires to care for his mother when they stop to eat. He has been cold for sometime as they walked, but when they enter the café, James moves aside from the heater so his mother can get warm. He then watches her count the little money she has, commenting, "Both of us know how much money she's got there"

(109). James, again maturing to manhood, is growing the characteristic of sacrificing for the family. He lies to his mother, insisting that he is not hungry. He tries to deny his hunger both to himself and to his mother, saying, "I hope she don't spend the money, I don't want her spending it on me. I'm hungry, I'm almost starving I'm so hungry, but I don't want her spending the money on me" (110). James has grown from the beginning of the story to a deeper understanding of money. At the beginning of the story, he is aware of financial burdens and does not want to tell his family about his sore tooth in case it upsets them. Now, he knows exactly how much money his mother has and he refuses to admit he is hungry to her so they will have money to buy meat for the family before they return. He has grown past the fear of anger into the need to provide for his siblings and the two women in his life, even if he cannot eat himself.

James' understanding of his family's situation grows to a sense of guilt. His mother is adamant about eating at the café because they are using their heater to get warm. James comments, "She flips the quarter over like she's thinking. She's must be thinking 'bout us walking back home. Lord, I sure don't want walk home. If I thought it'd do any good to say something, I'd say it. But Mama makes up her mind 'bout things" (110). Ignoring James' determination to remain hungry, his mother orders him a piece of cake and a glass of milk. As she watches him staring out the window, James reflects, "She's looking outside at the sleet. She's looking real sad. I say to myself, I'm go'n make all this up one day. You see, one day, I'm go'n make all this up. I want say it now; I want to tell her how I feel right now; but Mama don't like for us to talk like that" (110). James feels guilty that his mother must provide for him. He is beginning to respond to his manhood that tells him that he must provide for his mother and sacrifice his own well-

being for her. However, he knows that his mother does not yet feel that he is ready to carry the burden. She does not want him to talk about it yet but continue to learn from her and from the other men, like the young student, whom he encounters.

James continues to show his understanding of his words through his actions. After he begins to feel guilty for allowing his mother to purchase the cake, he tells her that he can not eat all the cake himself. However, to himself he says, “They ain’t but just three little old cakes there. I’m so hungry right now, the Lord knows I can eat a hundred times three, but I want my mama to have one” (110). Baab posits, “In his regarding his mother while he eats, James’ maturation becomes evident in his transition from a boy cared for by his mother to a young man who will some day care for her” (27). James’ experience in the café shows his maturity throughout the day. He has not only grown to realize that he must sacrifice and provide for the family one day, but he now exemplifies it in his behavior toward his mother. He wants to protect her from the cold by giving her his warmth, he fantasizes about buying her a red coat, and now he pretends not to be hungry so she will eat one of the small pieces of cake she has purchased from him. There is a definite role shifting as the two sit at the table eating. James is no longer a helpless child, but a future man who will one day care for his mother, aunt, and younger siblings.

The final scenes in the short story accentuate the transformation James experiences in the café. James and his mother leave the eatery and begin to walk again continuing to wait for the dentist to see his tooth. As they walk, they encounter an old White lady who apparently is waiting for them to pass her house. When she offers them food, James’ mother is too prideful to take the food for free. The old lady looks at James and reiterates to him his role as a man in his family saying, “The boy’ll have to work for

it. It isn't free" (113). Unlike the previous scene when James' mother has refused him the chance to fully provide for her by refusing his cake, James is finally able to satisfy his desires to reach his manhood by providing for his mother. He now has the chance to work for her and give her something, even if it is just a little food. All of his wishes throughout the story to care for his mother and show her his love are met in this exchange between the old lady and the young boy. Although James only moves small trash cans for the woman, he feels the responsibility he has been craving fulfilled. James says, "I look at Mama. She's eating slow like she's thinking. I wonder what's the matter. I reckon she's thinking about home" (115). James' mother watches her son provide for her the nourishment she needs to return outside in the cold and wait for the dentist. Her thoughts shift to the statement James' actions make about his forthcoming manhood. She knows she has taught him that a true man provides for his family. Her lessons seen earlier in the episode with the birds escalate to James' working and giving his mother his rewards. James has not only listened to his mother's private lessons but has used them in public life to fight the racism and expectations for a young Black male. He has overcome the struggles and has started to learn how to be a man.

The final interaction between mother and son summarizes the day's turmoil and James' transformation from a fearful child to a growing man. Again in the cold, James turns his coat collar up to stay warm. His mother tells him to take it back down declaring, "You not a bum. You a man" (117). Fitzgerald remarks on the mother's final words saying, "Here's a mother with such a wonderful strength, a strength that comes from the earth, a strength that goes beyond…to a kind of independent, proud spirit. She is rearing a son in the same tradition, and she succeeds very well indeed" (12). James' mother's

success is seen in both her attitude towards her son and his maturity by the end of the day. She has hardly said any words throughout the story, only observing her son as he walks through Baton Rouge. However, she saves the words that she wants to tell her son until the end of their journey saying, “You a man.” Her son has begun the necessary steps needed to reach his manhood. He has grown during their trip to Baton Rouge from a scared child, to finding a male to emulate, to caring for his mother, and finally providing for her hunger through work. All the lessons she has taught him so far in his life are beginning to reap rewards for her. Leaving the old woman’s house, James’ mother has learned that her son is a man and will reach the manhood that she desires for him.

CHAPTER 3

A FATHER BECOMES A MAN

Following the success of his short story “The Sky Is Gray,” Gaines embarked on a literary journey to tell the story that was haunting him for years. In his novel *In My Father’s House*, Gaines explores the relationship between father and son and the separation they have from each other either because of abandonment or the inability to create a solid connection. His novel tells the story of a mysterious young man, Robert X, who arrives to a small Louisiana town claiming to have a meeting with a man who lives there. Eventually, we discover that he is the son of Phillip Martin, an acclaimed preacher and civil rights activist. As the plot develops, Martin is forced not only to acknowledge Robert as his son but to confront the past that he has hidden from his current family and to see the destruction resulting from his actions. In his exploration of his past, Martin discovers that he never has learned what it means to be a man. He must revisit the trails of his youth to reach the manhood that he has abandoned years before. At the same time, Robert’s life without a father has left him bitter and angry. He never reaches his potential to become a man but denies himself the one opportunity to connect with his father and settle his opposition with himself. Unlike Martin, Robert cannot achieve manhood status and kills himself through his fury and frustration. At his son’s death, Martin finally connects his past with his current family. Through Robert, Martin learns not only how to be a man but also how to be a father.

Like the cliché of many mystery novels, it is a dark and stormy night when Robert X first arrives to St. Adrienne. He stops at Virginia Colar’s house to rent a room, and she

is immediately struck by his raw appearance. Gaines writes, “He was too thin, too hungry-looking. She didn’t like the little twisted knots of hair on his face that passed for a beard. He looked sick. His jaws were too sunken-in for someone his age. His deep-set bloodshot eyes wandered too much” (2). This physical description of Robert X is all the audience learns of him for some time. It is an important passage because it introduces many of the themes of Robert’s life that Gaines explores later in the novel. His life is a struggle for him; he is hungry and dirty. He struggles to survive at his young age to a point that he appears older than he is. Although he cannot grow a full beard, his face bears the seriousness and exertion of someone much older. Most importantly, his eyes wander as if he has never learned to trust. In addition, they are bloodshot from travel and exhaustion. Robert’s appearance causes Virginia to be alarmed; there is something in his wandering eyes that make her nervous.

Against her better judgment, Virginia agrees to rent the young man a room. Curious of his past, she asks the young man where he is from and his name, to which he answers “Robert X.” Karen Carmean suggests, “Recalling Malcolm X, who said that the X represented the unknown African ancestor instead of a name conferred by a slave owner, the X also suggests Robert’s unclaimed status” (84). Like his physical appearance, the name Robert chooses emphasizes his state of loneliness and confusion. He feels no connection to his given name, but rather disguises his past with a name that offers no hints to his familial life. He knows that the child should take on the last name of the father, but because his father abandons him this is never offered to Robert. Eventually, he chooses the name Robert X as symbol of the abandonment of his father and the aftermath of his life because of that decision.

At first Virginia is too nervous to approach Robert, assuming he is a young Muslim radical, but eventually her guilt of seeing the hungry young male leads her to his room to offer him food. When she enters the room, Robert is simply lying on the bed appearing to be asleep. When Virginia offers him the food, he asks her if there are any churches in the area. She is quick to brag about the pastor of her Baptist church. She tells Robert, “We got a Baptist church just up the street there. Solid Rock Baptist Church. My Church. Reverend Philip J. Martin, pastor. Maybe you done heard of Reverend Martin up there in Chicago” (9). For the next several chapters leading to the introduction of Phillip Martin, Gaines’s other minor characters offer nothing of him but praise. Virginia is quick to assume that Martin’s reputation exceeds beyond their small town. In addition, she tells Robert that Martin is their local civil rights leader. His reputation is built on the foundation that he is a good man. Before Robert’s arrival, Martin is the town’s local hero. He is an organizer and is making progress in the civil rights movement. Currently, Martin is organizing a protest against Chenal, a local storeowner who discriminates and cruelly treats Black patrons. Virginia tells Robert, “He’s done everything. Everything. That’s what he’s done--everything. Changed just about everything round here, ‘cept for old Chenal up there. But it won’t be long ‘fore Chenal fall too. He’ll fall just like all the rest” (10). Martin’s history as a preacher and activist wins the town peoples’ respect. Only Robert knows Martin’s true character and the past that he conceals from his admirers.

Robert’s visit to the town becomes more mysterious to its inhabitants as he walks around looking like “a ghost wearing a long overcoat and a knitted cap pulled all the way down to his ears” (11). This description of Robert as a ghost creates a haunting image for both the reader and the characters. Robert has yet to see his father, but already drifts

around the town, through Martin's friends and admirers' lives. No one knows why he is there, but they are curious about his presence, documenting his every move. People see him standing by the river, in the cemetery, but most importantly in front of Phillip Martin's house. Robert's haunting image outside Martin's house foreshadows his ghostly presence in Martin's life. As a child, Robert is only in Martin's life momentarily. Now as an adult, he returns to expose the ghosts in Martin's past. His attendance goes virtually unnoticed except as a conversation topic of his abnormal behavior and quietness. Gaines writes, "He never spoke to anyone. He never asked anyone about anyone else. Yet, day and night, whether it was raining or not, they would meet him or pass him walking on the street. Several people had seen him on St. Anne Street, not far from the house where the minister and civil rights leader Phillip Martin lived" (13). Robert X's journey to St. Adrienne is driven by the anger he feels towards his father. He desires no conversation or interaction with people, just revenge on the man who has left him years before. His quietness is a weapon that hides his hatred until he eventually meets Martin.

During Robert's numerous walks and unexplained visits in town Martin's reputation as a moral and solid example of a man enhances through the people Robert meets. Elijah Green, a teacher and tenant of Martin, encounters Robert walking on the street and offers him a ride. While in Elijah's car, Robert again asks about Martin. Similar to the praise he receives from Virginia, Elijah also raises Martin to a higher status declaring him the civil rights leader, "Our Martin Luther King, you might say" (16). Furthermore, Elijah defends Martin's placement in the high class by "his work, his leadership, political, and moral. His character" (16). All of the attributes Elijah assigns to Martin are those possessed by a male who reaches his full potential. Such a man works

by becoming an example of manhood for other young males to emulate. Elijah, as well as other people, believes Martin's character is an example of leadership. To them, he is a strong man who, they believe, will lead their race to advancement. The people trust Martin in their movement and anticipate success.

In spite of his success now, Robert remembers Martin as the father who has abandoned his family. He knows Martin's lack of responsibility and selfishness because he is a victim from it. Robert even questions Elijah: "Do you ever know a man's character?" (16). Elijah is adamant that he knows Martin to which Robert only grunts in silent realization. Robert knows that his manhood has been stolen from him because of Martin's actions. To Robert, Martin possesses none of the qualities that Elijah and the other people of St. Adrienne admire. Martin has left his family over twenty years ago, but his decision's aftermath is still being felt by his son.

Before Elijah leaves Robert he invites him to a party at Martin's house in on Saturday evening. During the two days before the party, Robert stays in his room and stops walking the streets. There is no need for Robert to wander through St. Adrienne because he has met his goal. At his arrival, Robert tells Virginia that he is in town for a meeting. This meeting will be on Saturday, when Robert finally sees his father. The alteration in Robert's character confuses the community, while his presence continues to haunt them. Although he has stopped walking the streets because he knows he will see his father, there is still no peace in Robert's life. Gaines writes, "The people on either side of him could hear him pacing the floor day and night. Friday night, sometime between twelve and one o'clock, they heard him scream. She could hear him crying quietly as, as though he might be lying on the bed with his face in the covers" (22). The

struggle Robert feels goes beyond his need to confront Martin. He is fighting against an experience that he cannot change in his past. He cannot alter his character to reach his manhood, nor can he change Martin's decision to leave his mother. There is one example that holds to show him that he is not a man. He feels he has failed himself and his family years before when he was not able to protect his sister from rape, and he links this failure directly to Martin, because he has now shown Robert how to be a man. Martin is not there to teach Robert how to protect his family, but more importantly, he is not there to relieve Robert of his burden. Robert has come closer to meeting Martin, which prompts him to stop walking the streets, but he is no closer to understanding himself than he has been before his arrival in St. Adrienne, which causes him to cry and scream at night.

After a couple of days, Elijah's friend Shepherd arrives at Virginia's boarding house to take Robert to Martin's home for the party. He enters Robert's room and is shocked both by his appearance and the stench of cheap wine that engulfs the area. As Shepherd coaxes Robert out of bed, he tells Shepherd that the wine kills the pain. This pain, seen earlier in Robert's physical description and actions, leaves him feeling weak. As he looks out the window into the alley below the boarding house, Robert says, "My soul don't feel good. Like garbage, broke glass, tin cans. Any trash" (25). Robert's soul aches beyond the cries at night because of his hatred for Martin. Robert suffers because he cannot reach his manhood as a result of Martin's abandonment and its subsequent isolation. This analogy of Robert as discarded trash expands as Robert reminds Shepherd that the trash is, at one time, considered valuable and worthy. He states, "Used to be something good in them bottles, in them cans. Somebody went through a lot of pain making them bottles round-red and green. Look at them now. Busted. Cans bent and

rusted. Nothing but trash. Nothing but trash now" (27). Robert knows he once has had the potential to be a man. He has been once "something good," but is now busted and wasteful. Daniel White comments on Robert's comparison of himself to trash saying, "he [Martin] will never be able to restore the something good he destroyed when, twenty-one years earlier he discarded his eldest son like one of the bottles in the alley" (163). The bottles become a symbol to Robert of the distance and detachment his father feels towards him. Robert believes he is nothing to his father but trash that can be thrust aside at any time and, in his mind, forgotten forever.

Shepherd pulls Robert away from the window and convinces him to leave the room and come to Martin's party. At first, Robert resists Shepherd's pleas to go with him, saying, "I don't want to be a burden on you" (27). Robert's life to this point leads him to feel like a constant burden to those around him. He lacks the independence that full manhood brings, and instead hides from the public and cries in private. When Robert again tells Shepherd that his soul is sick, Shepherd reassures him that he will be okay saying, "Then you need to see a priest, or a preacher, or somebody like that" (27). At Shepherd's suggestion, Robert begins to laugh but at the same time reminds himself why he is in the town. Since his sister's rape, Robert prepares himself to meet Martin. He must face the father who has left him and show Martin his damaged life. Robert knows that he must rise above his past and meet Martin to confront him. However, as much as he wishes to be a man when he goes to the party to fulfill his plan, Robert is not ready. There is still too much anger and sadness in him, but he agrees to go with Shepherd, concluding, "When I'm gone, you'll know why I had to drink"(28). Robert already admits defeat to himself. He knows he will not win the battle with himself to become a

man, but in his route he will unknowingly guide Martin. By going to the party now and not waiting, Robert becomes Martin's path to his past and, eventually, the reason Martin reaches his manhood.

Robert and Gaines' audience finally see Phillip Martin at the party. Shepherd initially acknowledges Martin from across the room telling, Robert, "Over there by the piano. Big man in the dark suit, talking to white folks. King Martin himself" (30). Unlike the early descriptions of Robert, Martin is as big as a king. All the other characters' praise of Martin eventually leads to the physical description that elevates Martin to a higher status both in physical appearance and personality. Gaines describes Martin:

> He was sixty years old, just over six feet tall, and he weighed around two hundred pounds. His thick black hair and thick well-trimmed mustache was just beginning to show some gray. Philip was a very handsome dark-brown-skinned man, admired by women, black and white (34).

Unlike Robert, Martin has the appearance of a man who reaches and goes beyond his potential. He is handsome, well-liked, and obviously admired. There seems to be no secret in his eyes or a past that haunts him and causes him to look hungry and aged. Martin has fooled the people to believe that he is a man. He gives them confidence that he can be trusted, and can give them equality through his leadership in the civil rights movement.

When Robert first sees Martin, he immediately breaks out in a sweat and begins to tremble. He has come face to face with the person responsible for his sorrow and weakness as a man. Gaines writes, "Shepherd was still looking at Phillip Martin and not at the tenant, so he didn't see how violently the tenant's face trembled when he saw the

minister for the first time…. Shepherd didn't look round at him for a moment, and when he did he saw him staring across the room like someone hypnotized" (30). Martin's reputation with the community continues to torment Robert as the people call him to make a speech about their civil rights movement. As Martin speaks, Robert sees his success in life in his gold jewelry that glitters against the light, the response from the people, and his role as leader in the community's civil rights plans. Martin makes a life for himself that ignores his past with Robert and his mother. He is an organizer who is followed and admired by both young and old people who trust him to make changes for them in St. Adrienne. Martin's success with the people continues to ruin Robert's hope to become a man. Robert already feels his life is a waste, that he is discarded trash. But now, as he sees his father and the contradictions between their lives, Robert begins to weaken. The hope that has led him to St. Adrienne to confront Martin leaves him at the party.

This confidence that the community has in Martin influences his own life of self-assurance. He controls the party through his speech and poise of his family. However, Martin's control shatters as he looks across the room while his young daughter plays the piano. Gaines writes, "But not everyone near the piano was listening to the music. Phillip Martin was not. Neither to the music nor to the people round him. For the past couple of minutes he had been looking across the room where Shepherd, Beverly, and Virginia's tenant were standing" (39). Mirroring Robert's earlier fascination with Martin, the roles now reverse, and Martin sees his son for the first time since his arrival in St. Adrienne. It takes Martin several minutes before he even realizes who Robert is and, when he eventually does, the shock of seeing his abandoned son causes him to collapse on the

floor walking toward him. Robert is one of the first people to rush to Martin as he falls; Gaines writes, “His reddish eyes narrowed, his face trembled as he stared down at him. It seemed for a moment that he might say something, maybe even scream, but he jerked away from the crowd and went out” (41). Robert exposes all his anxiety and hate as he looks at his father on the floor. However, because he is weak, Robert says nothing but turns away from the scene. Ironically, even in his weakness, Robert is responsible for his father’s fall. When Martin sees his son, he knows he can no longer be successful and a leader. With his son’s arrival, Martin is forced to examine his soul and recognize his son’s weakness.

As Robert watches his father lie on the floor, all his doubts about Martin surface. He suspects that his father is not the man who everyone praises him to be, but now as he stands above the man responsible for his misery, Robert unknowingly wins a battle. He forces his father to not only acknowledge his presence at the party but prompts him to cry, “Don’t let me deny him again” (41). The humiliation of Martin’s past life resurface as he sees his son across the room. However, at the same time it is too much for Robert. Simultaneously, both Robert and Martin confront their manhood. Both males, bound by blood and separated by hatred, must eventually see themselves for the men that they think they are, or the men that may never be.

After Martin is pulled from the floor and placed into his bed, he begins his exploration into his past. Valerie Baab writes, “His collapse in the living room starts him on a journey to his past and subsequently to the acknowledgement of those aspects of his identity he has denied” (101). Initially, Martin resists the need to remember his past life that includes another family, whom he creates in selfishness. Gaines writes, “He was

trying not to think about the boy. He didn't want to think about him in here because he couldn't think clearly enough here" (46). Robert invades Martin's current life and he tries to ignore the inevitable. His forgotten son returns into his life, but with a mission to force Martin to admit that he is responsible for Robert's downfall as a man. Already Martin's position in the church and the movement fade in the background as he begins to focus on the role Robert will play in his life. As much as he tries to withstand thinking about Robert and his sudden arrival at the party, he still cannot preach the next day, nor does he argue when he is forced to stay in bed. The attributes most important to Martin become lesser priorities when he sees Robert. However, Martin is still not ready to admit his mistakes, thus acknowledging that he is robbing both himself and Robert of being a man. Still the same person he was years before, Martin has only disguised his selfishness and insecurities with religion and power.

The more Martin tries to resist the haunting image of Robert, the more his curiosity builds. Gaines writes, "Phillip started thinking about the boy again. Why? He asked himself. Why after all these years--why? And how did he know where to find me? Did she send him here? And if she did, why this game…Come into the house, watch me, but say nothing--why? What's he want? What's he up to?" (51). Although Martin asks these questions, it is clear he is not yet ready to accept responsibility for his past actions. Rather than direct the questions towards his role, Martin places the responsibility of Robert's arrival on Robert and his mother. At the same time Martin becomes paranoid that the two are conspiring to destroy him. As Martin looks out the window into the yard where Robert has patiently waited to see his father, Gaines writes, "Where was the boy? Where was he at this moment? Why wasn't he passing the house? Phillip had heard that

he walked the streets day and night, whether it was raining or not, whether it was cold or not-then where was he now?" (52). Martin's curiosity at seeing his abandoned son, makes Martin want to see Robert. Although Martin is not emotionally mature enough to talk to his son, he wants to see him, showing his childish desires. Martin is not ready to have Robert in his life, or admit his past, but he wants Robert to need him. Once again, Martin places his desires above his son's, and he is not concerned with his own actions.

This paranoia, as well as Martin's denial of Robert, is an aspect of his life that begins to haunt Martin prior to Robert's arrival. The night before Robert travels to St. Adrienne, Martin dreams that he changes his decision to leave Robert's mother and their children. Gaines writes, "He left with the money, but soon brought it back. When he left the second time, Phillip got up from the bed and ran after him. In the dream it happened like that, but twenty-one years ago he hadn't run after the boy at all" (53). Martin's dream becomes an omen that prepares him to react to Robert's arrival. In the dream, Martin can claim his son and give the financial support he denies the family. Like his insistence to deny Robert as his son, the dream is another form of guilt that begins the foundation for Martin to become a man. Baab posits, "His inability to act and his inability to acknowledge Robert lay the foundation for the collapse of his power as a black leader" (101). In order for Martin to begin his impending journey into the past, he must lose all of his present power. This loss is initiated with Martin's dream but expands with the arrival of Robert. Martin may not be ready to confront his son and his past, but he is forming the desire to prove his manhood. This desire is also the formation of Martin's guilt. He may not be ready to question his manhood, but Martin now has the motivation to confront his past.

As Martin tries to connect his past with his emotions of guilt, he begins to include his past life into his present. For many years Martin has forgotten Robert and his mother Johanna, but now they haunt him day and night. As he sits with his current wife Alma and their children, he pictures the day Robert is born. Gaines writes, "…he was born the winter of '42. Cane cutting-grinding. Because she had cut cane all day Saturday and the boy was born on Sunday…. He saw the baby a week later when she brought him to the gate wrapped in a blanket" (62). The impression of his first son outweighs Alma as she continues to talk to Martin as if he was listening only to her. Likewise, later at the same meal Martin pictures Johanna leaving him as he gambles their last bit of money away. However, Martin is still wavering on remorse and comments, "That was over twenty years ago. He hadn't sent her one penny or written one letter in all that time, and neither had he received a letter from her" (64). Martin's transition to manhood begins slowly. He sees Robert which causes him to remember his old lifestyle and selfishness. He begins to feel guilty and a desire to prove his manhood, but Martin has yet to realize that he has never reached his manhood. He is still the same selfish male but is finally beginning to question his past decisions by remembering his children.

Although he is not ready to accept Robert or his old lifestyle, Martin wishes for a connection with his son. Therefore, he invites Elijah and the teachers to his house for wine on Tuesday. Hoping his son will come with Shepherd and his girlfriend, Martin ignores Alma's pleas to not have a social gathering so soon after his collapse. Mirroring his earlier selfish action abandoning Johanna, Martin still has not reached a place to compromise in his life. He does not listen to Alma, nor does he consider her opinion. Carmean remarks on Martin's treatment of his family, saying, "He provides them with a

comfortable life, but because of a history of guilt and insecurity, he holds himself apart" (137). Martin may have a new life now, but he still possesses the characteristics that have led him to leave his children and their mother. He may be a leader in the community, but he never has become a man to Alma and their children.

Martin's immaturity is further shown through his decision to try to win Robert through a social party with the best wine. Martin still believes he does not need to change his current life to reach his son. Even his method of enticing Robert to his house shows his noncommittal attitude. He attempts to win Robert with wine in a form of communion. Martin tries to pull Robert into his life through his leadership in faith. He is not ready to regress into his past but hopes to simply bring Robert into his current life with no opposition. In his vision, Robert will arrive at the house and they can talk and walk in the yard or even go for a car ride. However, even in his unrealistic vision, Martin thinks, "But talk about what? Talk about what? They were total strangers. The boy was his son by blood only. How many times had he held him in his arms? How many times had he ridden him on his back? He couldn't recall now if he ever did. He couldn't recall his true name" (67). Martin's doubts continue to surface, but he ignores them. He wants to vision a happy reunion, instead of examining his manhood and his past. Of course, Robert never arrives at Martin's house and the hope that Martin clings to that the reunion will be simple is shattered. The collapse of Martin's current power that has been predicted earlier through his dreams, guilt, and Robert's arrival finally happens. The failure of Martin's childlike belief that father and son can be reunited prompts him to question his faith, family, and civil rights responsibility. The maturity that he lacks in his life, but disguises with power is forced into question and Martin's journey officially begins.

Martin's collapse begins with his questioning of faith. The next morning, Martin fails to follow his daily spiritual pattern. Gaines writes, "But he didn't begin with the Lord's Prayer as he usually did each day, and neither did he say any of the things that he said daily since his conversion. Instead, he asked the same question over and over, 'Why? Why? Why? Is this punishment for my past? Is that why he's here to remind me?'" (69). Martin's faith is the basis of his confidence. His popularity begins first in his church and later expands to include his civil rights activism. However, now that Robert is in his life again, Martin questions God. God remains mute, overlooking Martin, causing him to plead, "Turn not thine ear from me in the day that I am troubled" (69). Martin is troubled because the faith he clings to offers no solace in his relationship with Robert. He tries to reach his son through religious sacraments but fails. Martin realizes that cannot reach his abandoned son through religion, nor can he live in his faith with Robert in his life. He no longer hides his past through his conversion, but is now exposed as the man he has never become.

As Martin questions his faith, he also begins to doubt his role in the civil rights movement. Gaines says, "He thought he had done a good job, at least both black and white told him so. But now, after seeing the boy in the house, after falling and not getting up, he had begun to question himself; Who really was Phillip Martin and what, if anything, had he really done?" (72). Martin's success in society wins his approval with both Black and White people. His activism in the civil rights movement makes him lead a protest against a local store owner, Chenal, with both races looking to him for leadership and organization. However, his assurance in the movement's success begins to change with Robert's arrival. He finally realizes that he has failed in his chance to be a man for

his family and now is trying to be a man for an entire city. The responsibility is too great for Martin, and he begins to waver in his control. Baab writes, "Phillip Martin is a leader, but the novel seems to query how a man who twenty-two years earlier forsook the role of leadership within his own family can accept the mantle of leadership in the present" (100). Martin's doubts for his success as a leader are a path he must take. It is essential for him to realize that he cannot maintain his responsibility in the movement and reach his son. As long as the nature of their relationship does not change, Martin cannot be a leader in the movement. He has too many doubts surrounding the responsibility he must have to be a leader for him to continue.

It becomes more evident that Martin is not ready to accept the responsibility of the leadership in the movement when the law forces him to choose between his eldest son and civil rights. When Robert fails to show at Martin's house for drinks , Martin learns that he has been arrested. In a movement to finally confront his guilt, and in one of his first selfless acts as a father, Martin goes to jail to pay for his son's bail. While meeting with the Sheriff, Martin finally admits to someone, other than himself, that Robert is his son. Initially, Martin is still weak and lies to Sheriff Nolan that the arrested young man is a member of a family he knows. When Nolan refuses to believe Martin, he nervously tells Nolan the only thing he has with the boy is that he is "my son" (86). Martin is finally taking the path that leads him to his past. He initially tries to ignore Robert and avoid the truth, but now he tells another male that Robert is his son.

When Nolan first learns that Robert is Martin's son, he is shocked that someone with Martin's reputation has never claimed his eldest child. Nolan starts to ask Martin the same questions that he has asked himself earlier. He questions Martin saying, "Let's start

all over. Let's start with why he's staying at Virginia's house and not with you. Look to me like he ought to be in his father's house" (87). Martin further exposes his secret life and admits to Nolan that he has never spoken to his son. Out of everyone in St. Adrienne, Nolan is the most aware of Martin's past. Because he has been sheriff since Martin's childhood he has both arrested and suspected Martin of many crimes, including murder, but nothing prepares Nolan for the truth of Martin's abandoned family. Like other citizens in the town, Nolan is familiar with Martin's role in the civil rights movement and the reputation he has built for himself, but now with the unearthing of this one lie, Martin and Nolan transgress to the past where Martin is not a man and lives a life of crime and viciousness. Like Robert, Nolan sees Martin as the man he is not, not as the man that he fools others in believing he is. Through his encounter with Nolan, Martin is further reminded of the guilt Robert's arrival brings. Martin continues to be pulled into the past as Nolan ridicules and questions his forgotten son.

Nolan reminds Martin of his past by questioning his intentions for trying to rescue his son from jail, but ignoring him since his arrival in town. He tells Martin, "Let's start over. Y'all ain't talked, y'all ain't seen each other in over twenty years--and he had to be a little nothing when he left from here--how you know he's your son" (88). Martin becomes adamant that Robert is his son exclaiming, "I know my blood" (88). The more Martin wants to see and talk to Robert the more Nolan knows he is willing to sacrifice other commitments in his life to restore his lost integrity since Robert's arrival in town. Nolan agrees to release Robert if Martin calls off the organized demonstration for Friday at Chenal's store. At first, Martin wavers, remembering the strength he has with his people. He is not ready to completely absolve his power but grasps on the last bit of his

remaining power saying, “I can’t take from them people what they have been working for so long. We just about changed everything in this town--except Chenal. He’s the only thing still holding out, the only one won’t go along. I can’t do that to my people” (90). As Chenal is the only person holding back Martin’s ultimate success as a civil rights leader, his son is the only person holding Martin back from reaching his full potential has a man. He disguises his hesitation to explore his past by clinging to the final protest in his line of success. However, at the same time if he chooses Chenal over Robert, he denies his son again.

Martin pleas with Nolan for a little longer trying to pay for his son’s bail. Eventually, Martin relents and chooses Robert over the civil rights movement. Even in his decision, Nolan ridicules Martin for his secret life saying, “I always thought you was different. Just go to show how wrong a man can be” (92). By choosing his son over the movement, Martin abandons the cause he devotes his life to. He already questions his religion, but now he questions the role of the movement in relation to his son. No amount of union between White and Black citizens can atone for his treatment of his son. There is obviously no bond between them, which becomes clear when Robert enters the room. Gaines writes, “He wore the big overcoat unfastened and the cap stuffed down into one of his pockets. His thin, patchy beard was as nappy as the hair on his head. Phillip reached his hand out toward him, but he went by as if Phillip was not even there” (93). Martin reaches to his son, but his son does not see him or desire a connection with him. Martin may finally be ready to reach his son, but it is too late. Robert has already surrendered to his suffering. He is weak and unwilling to fight any more.

In an interview with Gaudet, Gaines addresses Martin's transformation from ignoring his son for twenty years to wanting to see him above faith and the movement. He tells Gaudet, "He's looking for his son, you know, and the boy says 'where were you?' He says 'well, I'm looking for you.' And the young guy says, 'well, it's too late now. There's no reaching me now'" (62). Martin is beginning to reach the maturity that he has lacked in his life and actions, even since Robert's arrival. Unlike earlier, he does not try to buy his son through wine or make excuses for his coming. He admits that Robert is his son and he wants to see him and touch him. However, it is too late for Robert. The hatred he feels toward Martin far surpasses any attempts Martin may make to reconnect their lives.

The barriers between father and son become more prevalent as Nolan questions Robert about Martin. Robert answers Nolan's question about Martin, saying he does not know if Martin is, in fact, his father and that he does not go by his father's name. Gaines writes, "'I like to be addressed as Robert X, sir,' he said, looking at Nolan for the first time. It was not a demand, he was merely emphasizing that Robert X was his only name" (94). Robert has no family or connection with his father, the name he should bear. Baab comments on this saying, "As Phillip's firstborn, he keenly feels that the family name Martin should have defined his identity, and his present existence, the name becomes meaningless and he assumes an alias" (98). Robert's decision to abandon his given name is his surrender to the fate of his life. He has no father, no man to imitate, and no hope to unite with Martin, and forget the years of distance between them. Even Nolan realizes all emotion has left Robert has he searches for defiance or anger, but finds none. Robert is on a mission to see his father and, more importantly, to avenge his father's desertion for

his mother and younger children. However, even in his desire to avenge his father, Robert is weak. Robert now lacks the anger and passion that has drawn him to St. Adrienne and simply ignores his father's presence. Robert has failed twice when he sees his father. The first time he runs, and now he says nothing to him.

Martin leaves the holding cell with his son and fulfills his earlier fantasy of taking his son for a ride in his car. Martin feels he is winning a success that comes somewhat simple. He is able to meet with his son with no major exploration into his soul. Yes, he has to release the power in his life, but he has yet to venture back in his past. He does minimal work for his reward. Martin has yet to question seriously the decision he has made twenty years earlier. So far, he only blames Robert and Johanna and sacrifices leadership in his present life. However, when he takes Robert in his car Martin learns he will have to do much more if he wants to reach the manhood he has fooled himself into believing he has. While in the car with his son, he finally begins to understand the pain and anger his decision causes in his children's life. There can be no reconciliation, and, until he fully examines his past and abandonment, there will no be manhood and fatherhood responsibility with his current family.

For their first several minutes together, Robert refuses to say anything to Martin. Ironically, Martin cannot think of a single conversation to start with his new son. Gaines writes, "Since leaving St. Adrienne, Phillip had been trying to think of a way to start a conversation with his son. Then he caught him looking at the houses on his side of the road" (96). Martin is desperate to reach his son even if it is just a simple conversation, and tries to get him to comment on the road, the houses, and the fields. Eventually, the only part of their lives in common leads Martin to ask Robert about his mother. Robert

answers his father's question saying, "She's not all right…grieving herself to death" (97). When Robert begins to talk about his mother, there is a new look in his eyes. It goes beyond pain to include hatred. He not only hates his father for leaving his family twenty years beforehand, he hates himself for not being able to protect his mother from the anguish she feels because of her children. When Robert tells Martin that the two other children have been dead for eleven years, Martin questions why he has never heard about their deaths to which Robert responds, "You never showed no interest in your own flesh and blood before. We didn't know you be interested in your own flesh and blood then" (98). Robert's anger at Martin's detachment is expanding beyond his own life. He now feels anger because of the suffering all the children endure. Martin hurt not just Robert but the entire family when he chose to abandon them twenty years beforehand. When Martin is able to take Robert in his car, he finally addresses questions surrounding his manhood. He asks about Johanna and the children, both of whom continue to lead Martin to his past.

Martin's questions about Robert's mother and siblings leads Robert to admit that he came to St. Adrienne for revenge. He tells Martin he is seeking revenge for "destroying me. For making me the eunuch I am. For destroying my family; my mama, my brother, my sister" (99). Martin has yet to realize how much he has truly destroyed his old family, particularly Robert. However, Robert already knows that he cannot reach his manhood because of his father's actions. He has no man to teach him, and does not know how to react when tragedy strikes his family. Robert fails his sister when she is raped by his mother's boyfriend and he does not bring himself to kill the man responsible. He fails his younger brother and forces him to assume the role of man of the

family, and stands helplessly by while his brother goes to jail for the rapist's murder. Although Martin's children are not physically dead as he assumes, Robert knows they are forever destroyed. They cannot look to Robert for example of manhood because he cannot be a man himself. Even his mother realizes that Robert is a failure and gives him the money to see his father. She knows he must meet the man that is responsible for his existence. Robert tells Martin he is not his son but his "moment of your lust" (99). Just as a moment of lust brings Robert into the world another such moment destroys him. Because Robert cannot replace Martin as a father or teach his brother manhood, he ultimately fails his siblings.

In his anger, Robert tells Martin that his mother not only has provided him the financial means for his trip but understands his reasons for going. After his sister's rape and brother's incarceration, Robert tells his mother that he will kill Martin for destroying the family. Robert tells Martin, "'Get yourself a ticket and go kill him,' she told me. 'Sew back your nuts by killing your father.' But I can't sew them back by killing you, can I? Can I, Father?" (99). Johanna understands Robert's plight of manhood because she is a victim of a man who fails her. She falls in love, and has three children with a man who never achieves manhood. She is a victim of selfishness and destruction because of abandonment. During her struggles, she helplessly watches her daughter be a victim and her eldest son turn to cowardice when his family needs him. Because of this background she knows that Robert must attempt one more time to be a man. Robert has to meet Martin and show him the devastation his choices cause. However, after Robert runs from his father at the party and does not confront him in front of the crowd, he again is overcome by fear and cowardice. He comes to St. Adrienne with one goal, to destroy and

impose revenge upon his father, but Robert cannot do it. He is too scared and too angry to fulfill his plan.

Although Robert repeatedly tells Martin he is in town for revenge and murder, Martin continues to try to connect with his son. It is Martin's only chance to avoid the route he must take to achieve manhood. He does not want to have to explore his past but gain acceptance from Robert simply by asking for his forgiveness. Martin still possesses the immaturity that causes him to leave Johanna, ignore Alma, and have childlike dreams of a union with his son. He tells Robert that although he cannot remember his name that he does love him. Martin says, "But you mine, and I love you. I love you now, and I loved you then. I was too weak then to do anything. Today I have strength. 'Cause today I have God" (100). Martin is still trying to excuse his behavior toward his son telling him that although he was once weak, he is strong now. But Robert knows that Martin is no stronger this day than he was twenty years earlier. Martin does not want responsibility for Robert's unhappiness, insisting that he has not destroyed him, but the world has. Robert again refuses to accept his father's excuses telling him, "The world laid with her in the field? Where did you take her? In the ditch?" (100). Baab comments, "Robert reminds his father that no amount of sorrow, regret, or religious purging can atone for the abandonment of family and disavowal of personal history" (103). Robert sees through Martin's reasons to the core of his soul and the immaturity that others miss because of his popularity and charm. He makes Martin realize that there is nothing and no one else, except for Martin, responsible for the decline of his family and Robert's manhood. He alone is accountable for his actions not the world or God.

Martin makes one last desperate attempt to reach Robert before his son leaves him. He tries to convince Robert that he really does love Johanna by giving the children all he once owned. Before he leaves, Martin gives Johanna three dollars, to which Robert continues to allude. The three dollars symbolize to Robert all he has hated in himself and his father. He tells Martin that he has tried to buy his family off, "A dollar for each one of us. That's what you paid. A dollar for each one of us" (101). As a child, Robert has to take the money from his father and give it to his mother. By taking the money, Robert not only lets his father leave but accepts the peace offering Martin gives Johanna for his abandonment. This event, along with his father's leaving, haunts Robert. It is his first chance to be a man, but he fails. He is not able to turn the money away; he gives Martin a sense of peace by taking some of Martin's guilt as his own. Later, Robert fails again when he is given another chance to show that he can be a man. Similar to Martin, Robert can not provide for his family when they need him.

Now as an adult, Robert clings to that memory of taking his father's money as fuel for both his hatred and as an example of his weakness as a man. A real man can refuse the money or throw the money back at his father. Robert continues to tell Martin that he should have done more for the family. He had more than three dollars to give. Robert says, "You had more. You had a mouth, a voice. You had arms, you had legs. You coulda walked out that door. That's all she wanted. You to walk out that door and call her back" (101). The weakness that Robert despises in himself, he also despises in his father. He forces Martin to admit that he is not a man to his family or to Johanna. Martin begins to cry and tells Robert, "Yes, I had a mouth, but I didn't have a voice. I had legs, but I couldn't move. I had arms, but I couldn't lift them up to you. It took a man

to do these things, and I wasn't a man" (102). As Martin spends time with Robert and listens to Robert's anguish and disappointment in life, he begins to understand what Robert is trying to teach him. Robert already knows that he will never be a man. His last hope was to avenge his mistakes on his father, but he cannot bring himself to do it. However, when he leaves Martin's car without completing his plan, Robert fails himself again. Ironically, Robert's failure encourages Martin to take the path that he needs to become a man. He already admits that he is not a man to his family and, as he watches Robert leave the car, Martin finally understands what he must do to be a man. He regress to his past. Martin has to realize why he has left Johanna and their children. He must confront the selfishness in his past life to become a man in his current life.

Martin's first stop on his journey to the past is his godmother's house on the old Reno Plantation where he was raised. Strangely drawn to the plantation, Martin feels that he may be able to hide his humiliation as he finally acknowledges the destruction he has caused. With Robert gone he cannot return home but instead goes to the place where he has felt safe as a child. As he arrives at the plantation, Martin is flooded with memories of Robert once again when he notices the landscape that covers the houses where he has lived and where Johanna has lived with their children. As he looks on the weeds that cover the homes of their relationship, Martin's shame continues to grow. Gaines writes, "Phillip stopped the car in front of his godmother's house, but now he was ashamed to go inside. How could he go in there and tell her how he felt…But if he couldn't go to her, where else would he go? Back to St. Adrienne and stand at the window again?" (106). At the same time, Martin knows that he belongs nowhere else at that moment but where he

is. He needs to be at the plantation where everything begins and discover the turn in his life that causes his children to possess so much hatred.

At his godmother's house, Martin is both shocked and comforted by the stagnation of his godmother's life. Her house is just as he remembers and she does not want to change anything about her life, not even something as small as installing a heater instead of using wood. Initially, Martin tries to avoid his godmother's questions concerning his earlier fall, but strangely she detects the core of his problems. Not long after his arrival, as Martin sits reassured by the sounds of men cutting wood in the backyard, she tells him, "Chippo saw Johanna" (111). Martin recalls not only Chippo as his old friend, but as the person responsible for taking Johanna and his children away the day he decides to leave them. Gaines writes, "For a moment it didn't mean anything, because he was half dreaming. Even when he heard her mentioning Johanna's name, he thought it was just his mind playing tricks…It was Chippo who took them away, he remembered. It was Chippo who drove them to the road that day in the wagon" (106). Martin becomes desperate to hear every detail of Chippo's encounter with Johanna. His godmother has little to offer him, but Martin is able to learn of Chippo's residency from the men cutting wood in the back. Chippo becomes Martin's hope to learn not only about Johanna but to see what his abandonment has truly done. He sees a glimpse of it through Robert, but he must find Chippo to gain the confidence he needs to find his manhood.

Martin leaves his godmother's house intent on finding Chippo the next day in Baton Rouge. He restores his self-esteem because he has a plan to reinstate the manhood he looses when he leaves Johanna. His self-assurance is noticeable, and he even tells the baker that "a little sun was peeping through the clouds" (116). However, when Martin

arrives at his home he again is reminded how difficult his journey will truly be. At his house, waiting for him, are the other men active in the movement. The men question their supposed fearless leader because of his earlier actions, dismissing the organized protest against Chenal. Instead of shying away as he has done in the past, Martin is ready to admit to his friends and family that Robert is his son, and as his father he needs to protect his son from harm. Martin tells his friends, "That's who I seen in that face Saturday. That's who I seen. I knowed it, I knowed it, I knowed I seen that face somewhere before…I recognized my boy cross the room last Saturday" (120). Martin is finally able to tell the truth because of his experience with Robert in the car and his hope that Chippo will answer his questions. Martin now realizes that he must admit that Robert is his son and that he has a secret life that many people may not understand. The civil rights movement is no longer as important to him as his son. There is hope for him to become a man, not because of his role in the movement, but because of his role as a father.

In his newfound strength, Martin is not only able to admit that Robert is his son but also that he has disowned him because he is fearful. He says, "Yes, I made a mistake. Yes, I shoulda got up off that floor and said who he was" (123). The other men in the movement are disgusted with Martin not just because of his secret past, but because he chooses that past over all their work. As they argue with him over the importance of the movement, Martin insists that he has made the right decision, telling them, "That's all I wanted…my son in my home. That's all. Nothing else" (128). But no matter what Martin says, the men are not ready to listen and dismiss him as president of their organization. Martin's earlier interaction with Robert gives him the strength to accept his demotion. He recalls Robert's words to him and tells Mills, an old friend and now colleague, that he

wants to reconcile with his past. Robert's words motivate him to find Chippo and find the answers that Robert wants when he asks about his relationship with Johanna. Martin tells Mills, "We loved each other. But right now, Mills, I can't even 'call that boy's name. Tell them that for me, Mills. Tell them why I got my son out of jail. I just wanted to know his name" (132). Right now in Martin's life, Robert and the past are most important to him. Martin must discard the pleasures in his life to reach his reunion with the past and ultimately find the courage to grasp the manhood he rejects in his life.

Before he leaves for Baton Rouge, Martin must face his present family. Martin's hidden past both shocks and infuriates his wife Alma. Their marriage is similar to his relationship with Johanna, he is distant towards her feelings and towards their children. Even now, he wants Alma to be the one to explain to the children why he must go. Alma responds to his request, "Me talk to the children? Say what to the children, Phillip? Say something about their brother…I didn't talk to their brother, you did. Look like you ought to be the one talking to the children" (135). Alma finally tells her husband that despite all their years, they do not have a real relationship, which is evident in their secrets and his lack of responsibility with the children. She says to him, "Ever since I met you, Phillip, you been running, running, and running. Away from what, Phillip? Trying to make up for what, Phillip? For what you did to that boy? For what you did to his mom? For other things you did in your past?" (136). Although she does not want to let her husband go to Baton Rouge, Alma is beginning to understand this is a journey that Martin must make. He is finally fulfilling his role as a father to one of his children. She now has hope as she tells him of her recurring unhappiness that he may return as the man she needs for her family. Martin leaves with determination to find the link that will bring his son back into

his life and ultimately find his manhood. At the same time, Alma waits for his return, holding their son and hoping that a true father will come back to them.

Like his wife, Martin desires to return the man that he never has been to Johanna and has yet to be to Alma. When he crosses over to Baton Rouge, Martin immediately stops at the first gas station to find someone who knows Chippo. Gaines writes, "He knew that most of the people in the book knew Chippo Simon, but he didn't know which of those would know where Chippo lived…He wanted to find Chippo as soon as possible and go back home" (139). Martin knows that he has taken steps to reach his manhood but must find Chippo to complete the process. He begins to make changes by admitting that Robert is his son and exposing the secrets of his past, but he needs Chippo to connect the entire process. Carmean states, "Having recognized his guilty past, Martin now believes his entire life has been for nothing" (82). It is obvious that Martin does feel his life has been for nothing. He loses the power he has in the community and with his family, but there is also a hope in Martin. When he finds Chippo this hope will release, and he can amend the past.

It takes some time for Martin to find Chippo. As he waits, Martin encounters people who not only remind him of his past but further reassure him that he must complete his journey. When Martin first finds Chippo's home, he initiates a conversation with two elderly women. During their time together, Martin hears of a young man who has been killed in the town. Later, at the café Martin reflects upon the death and its effect on the boy's mother. Martin's thoughts direct towards his life at home and he questions himself, "But why was he here? Why? Why couldn't he forget like the rest did? Men see their bastards walking by the house every day-some even joke about it. He had done the

same" (150). Martin cannot forget about Robert, because Robert is a reminder of his suppressed manhood. Martin realizes he has not reached his manhood through Robert's arrival in town, and he wants to release the sorrow he feels when he sees Robert. He wants to find the missing piece in his life that will allow him to be the man he desires. Robert becomes more than one of his "bastards," but a symbol of the man Martin knows he can be.

After another battle with his doubts, Martin tries to find Chippo again, this time in a liquor store. By going to the liquor store, Martin continues to regress to his past. Already he has gone into rough neighborhoods and seedy diners, but now he enters a place that has, in his old life, entertained him and his friends. Martin still remembers how to act in the liquor store, imitating his old actions and speech as well as the men in the store. Chippo is not at the liquor store, but Martin encounters a young man named Billy. Martin offers Billy a ride and soon the two begin to discuss not only manhood but also Billy's father. During their conversation, the similarities between Billy and his own son Robert become clear to Martin. Carmean suggests, "Gaines creates Billy as Robert X's active twin" (85). The resemblance between the two men is striking. Both boys possess an anger that drives them to isolation and to question the opinions of the older generation. Unlike Robert, Billy is not driven by hate for his father but by hate for the entire civil rights movement that continues to oppress Black males.

Billy's anger at the movement prompts him to tell Martin, "This little black-ass nigger you see sitting here 'side you will one day destroy this world, Pops. We been here nearly four hundred years-nothing to show for it but pain and sorrow" (164). Billy's pain is different from Robert's, but he still links Martin to it. By calling him "Pops" twice

during their conversation, Billy is elevates Martin as both a leader and oppressor in the movement. To Billy, Martin possesses everything that he despises by making excuses that the movement may work. There are no changes in Billy's life because of civil rights, which he continues to tell Martin. Because Billy reminds Martin of Robert, Martin asks him about his relationship with his father. Billy tells him, "I don't bother him, he don't bother me" (165). Martin becomes desperate to connect with Robert through Billy. He asks Billy what he can do to fill the gap between fathers and sons. But like Robert, Billy denounces both the faith and the movement that first brought Martin confidence. He tells Martin, "Just because I can eat at the white folks' counter with my daddy, just because I can ride side him in the front of the bus don't mean we any closer" (166). Mirroring the earlier episode with Robert in his car, Martin is being told again by another young man that his efforts so far are futile. The only way he can fill the gap with his son is to examine his own soul and not disguise his past with his religion or civil rights.

When Martin finally is able to talk to Chippo, his old friend reaffirms the destruction of his first family. Martin waits long enough for Chippo to sit down until he says to him, "I know you saw her" (182). Martin is ready to hear all the answers to his questions. He wants to know his children's names, and he wants to know about their lives after he left them. Martin has prepared himself for the answers throughout the day as he journeys in Baton Rouge, confronting his past by visiting his old scene and through his conversation with Billy. Martin waits eagerly for Chippo to tell him the children's names, "Etienne, Antoine, and Justine" (183). When Chippo begins to tell Johanna's story, he exposes Martin's past and the poverty he has left his girlfriend and children in. At the same time, Chippo warns Martin that Johanna clings to the hope that he may return one

day. Chippo says, “Johanna still love you Phillip…deep, deep love for you. Up till a month ago, she thought you might knock on that door any moment to take her back” (185). Johanna may have faith that Martin will return, but her children know better. Robert’s hatred towards Martin begins long before his revisit in Martin’s life. It begins has he watches his mother try to survive and males use her, all while Robert is forced to try to be the man of the house.

Chippo is able to experience firsthand Johanna’s sorry state because of Martin. She is alone, all her children except Etienne have left her, her appearance is changed, and she still is hopelessly in love with the man responsible for all her loss. As Chippo visits with Johanna there is no other movement in the house until he mentions Martin’s wife and St. Adrienne. Then he hears a noise in the other room that lets him know someone is staying in the bedroom. Later, after he leaves Johanna’s house, Chippo learns from the local shopkeeper of the young man who keeps himself locked in the room. Etienne, later Robert, hides himself because he fails his family as man of the house. As Robert tells Martin earlier, he stands by while his brother avenges his sister’s rape. However, Robert’s struggle with his manhood begins much earlier than the rape. Chippo learns from the shopkeepers, “He was man of the house. The man of the house. She told it to him right there in front of me…she took him by the hand, looking straight in his face-a scared, confused little boy” (194). Robert’s mother tells him as a child that he must be a man, but he has no one to teach him what this means. Johanna is too concerned waiting for Martin, and Martin is too selfish to acknowledge his son. Robert is raised on the belief that he is a man but has no foundation to build upon with his mother’s instructions.

Because of his lack of foundation, it is not surprising that Robert hides when asked to behave like a man. His younger brother wants him to prove his manhood by killing his sister's rapist. After Robert refuses and Antoine pulls the trigger, Robert tries to take the gun from his brother thus taking the blame. But Antoine refuses telling him, "It's too late now" (196). By taking the gun, Robert hopes to win his family's approval and prove that he can be a man, but he has already failed them. Chippo tells Martin, "Antoine and Etienne would talk. He had forgiven Etienne for not taking the gun. But now he was the man, and he let Etienne know it. When he pulled that trigger, then he was the man" (198). Robert's decision to stay in his room after his siblings leave is based on fear and confusion. He does not know how to be a man, but he knows that his brother is one. That night when he hears Chippo talking about Martin, Robert knows he is given another chance. He cannot only avenge his sister's rape for a second time, but avenge his own destruction of manhood. By confronting his father, Robert can redeem his earlier cowardice and repay Antoine for his bravery by killing another man responsible for his family's destruction.

After Chippo answers Martin's questions about the children, defeat overcomes Martin because there is nothing he can do to change the past. He tells Chippo, "You know how hard I been trying to forget it? I went to religion to forget it. I prayed and prayed and prayed to forget it….But from that moment I saw him in that house--I fell, Chippo, I fell" (201). Martin's fall has to come. He needs to go to his past and confront all the lies and secrets, seeing the horrid results because of his actions. Baab comments, "His first step in unearthing of self is to realize he can offer no adequate explanation for his actions and to cease running from his past" (104). At this moment, Martin stops

running for good. He learns what his actions cause by seeing the destruction in Robert, and he stops making excuses. Martin tells Chippo that he has fallen, but what Martin does not know is that he has fallen long ago. By admitting that he tries to disguise his past and that he is fallen, Martin finally begins to rise again and achieve the status of a man.

Martin's succession from his past and reunion with his family begins immediately. He tells Chippo, "Paralysis kept me on that bed that day he knocked on that door. Paralysis kept me on the floor Saturday when I shoulda got up and told the people who he was. I thought fifteen years ago when I found religion I had overthrown my paralysis. But it's still there Chippo. How do I get rid of it?" (202). Before Chippo can answer the question, Alma arrives with news of Robert's death. All Robert's frustration of never reaching manhood is too much for him and he decides to end his life. In Robert's death, though, Martin is able to release his sorrow and anger. Martin wants to be a man but stands by while his son is not able to find his manhood; however, Martin is now given another chance. But he cannot do it by himself. Martin is too beaten and tries to conceal the hope he finds earlier. He tells Alma, "Nobody know how this nigger feels. You work, you work--what good it do? You bust your ass--what good it do? Man and God, both in one day, tell you go to hell, go fuck yourself" (207). Martin is so close to becoming a man but is resisting the final evolvement. He feels that everything is to waste because he is not able to reach Robert as he has hoped.

Martin continues to question those with him, asking them why he should become the man that he now knows he can be. Like his son earlier, he asks questions but sees the answers as excuses. Martin inquires, "Why won't He (God) let this poor black man reach his son? Was that so hard to do? Was that asking Him too much?" (209). Martin becomes

desperate for a solution but at the same time reaffirms the transition he makes during the day. The outcome may not have been what he wants for he is not able to establish a relationship with Robert, but he is able to amend his past. Martin says, “I was an animal before I was Reverend Phillip J. Martin. I was an animal. He changed me to a man. He straightened my back. He raised my head. He gave me feelings, compassion, made me responsible for my fellow man” (211). Through his son’s death, Martin is returning to the faith and confidence that he possesses before Robert’s arrival. His past self is beaten and has been destroyed. Martin recognizes not only Robert as his son but the destruction of his actions. He compares himself to an animal but reiterates to himself that he is a changed man now. Twenty years ago he may not have known how to be a man, but now because of the path he takes today, Martin can finally be the man that he wants to be.

The last step for Martin to become a man is to recognize that he has another son that he can be an example to. Although he has failed Robert, Martin can be both a father and an example of manhood to his youngest son Patrick. Beverly, Alma’s friend, tells Martin, “You wanted the past changed, Reverend Martin. Even He can’t do that. So that leaves nothing but the future. We work toward the future. To keep Patrick from going to that trestle” (213). Martin needs to regain his self-confidence and provide for his family beyond what he once did. Shelton comments, “Martin moves toward manhood and indeed does assume responsibility for family, church and community” (342). Martin is finally able to raise himself off the floor. He has fallen long ago and falls a second time at Robert’s arrival. He was not able to go to his son, but now after exploring his past he can once again stand and be a man. Alma tells Martin, “We just go’n have to start again” (214). Martin is able to return to his family and start over because he finally reaches his

manhood. He battles with his faith, his past, his power, and his son. Throughout his journey, Martin sees his mistakes and destruction, but he finally forgives himself. Martin has a second chance to be a father to his son Patrick, and he can teach him to the man that Martin just has shown himself to be.

CHAPTER 4

MEN HELPING MEN

Ernest Gaines continues his theme of suppressed manhood in his most recent novel, *A Lesson before Dying*. Similar to his earlier works, Gaines depicts the struggles of black men in the South, during heights of racism and oppression. Like his males in "The Sky Is Gray" and *In My Father's House*, Gaines's new characters must also conquer outside forces and expectations, in order for them to become men. However unlike his earlier works, *A Lesson before Dying* develops a unique relationship between two different males, which leads each male to discover his manhood through the other. In this novel, it is not a journey to the past or an experience in town that changes viewpoints, but it is a friendship that teaches Grant Wiggins and Jefferson to be men. Although the friendship begins unexpectantly, and rather forcefully, the two males come to depend upon each other, and turn to each other for support in a White society full of opposition. In order for the two characters to reach their manhood, they must learn from the other's experience and connect it to their lives. When this connection is made, and a cycle of suppressed manhood breaks, Grant is able to return to his plantation life with higher expectations of discovering not only his manhood but also teaching his male students that they too can become men.

The men's battle for manhood begins as the novel opens during Jefferson's trial for murder and robbery. A highly impressionable and less intelligent man, Jefferson becomes an accomplice to his crimes when he decides to go to a liquor store with two other males, Brother and Bear. While at the store, these two males rob the owner Grope, who in turns kills them before he is fatally wounded. Both witnesses and police find

Jefferson in the store attempting to take the money from the cash register and, despite his pleas of innocence, he is arrested for the murder of a white male. Immediately, Jefferson must struggle for his manhood not only through his feelings of guilt and anger, but with a justice system constantly telling him that he is not human, let alone a man. As his lawyer argues his case, Jefferson sits quietly in the defense chair and listens as his life is ridiculed as meaningless. His lawyer begins his plea saying, "Gentlemen of the jury, look at this--this--boy. I almost said man, but I can't say man. Oh, sure, he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this--this--this a man? No, not I" (7). During his speech, the lawyer continues to question Jefferson as a man. According to his lawyer, Jefferson is not guilty of the crime becomes he lacks intelligence and manhood. A real man knows not to go into a liquor store with trouble makers, but Jefferson is not a man. Jefferson is not intelligent enough to plan a robbery and murder the storeowner. Jefferson's pride and manhood are taken from him immediately. His development to reach his manhood stop as he listens to descriptions of himself that demoralize him and seize his self-esteem to ever become a man.

Throughout his argument, the lawyer continues to condescend Jefferson's manhood by asserting that Jefferson cannot be a man because he is only an object. He tells the jury, "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" (8). Jefferson begins to see himself as just a worker, a producer. His lawyer tells not just the courtroom, but Jefferson, that he is not intelligent, mature, or civilized enough to become a man. His function, like the Black males before

him, is to work for the White males. By connecting Jefferson earlier with Africa, and now with the work of slave laborers, his lawyer places Jefferson in the cycle of oppressed Black males. Jefferson begins to believe that he will never be a man because of his skin color. Finally, the lawyer concludes his argument, saying, “What justice would there be to take his life? Justice, Gentleman? Well, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair” (8). Jefferson is not a man but an animal that acts on instinct. His lawyer, as well as others in the courtroom, try to excuse Jefferson’s crime because he is not a man. However, during their defense they succeed in smothering Jefferson’s desires to reach his manhood. Jefferson, of course, is sentenced to death, but he begins to die immediately. Because he believes he cannot become a man, Jefferson waits in his prison cell ignoring his family, because he knows that if he cannot become a man than he will continue the cycle of other oppressed Black males from which his family has tried to save him.

The shock of the trial and Jefferson’s sentence does not disturb his Godmother Emma as much as the implication that he is not a man. When the trial finishes, Emma visits her friend Tante Lou, Grant Wiggin’s aunt, to try to convince Grant to visit Jefferson. Grant, the plantation elementary school teacher, has a reputation of being a man. However, like Phillip Martin, Grant has created a façade that leads people to believe he is a man. He may have once received his education and even has left the plantation, but he still possesses too much fear to be a man. Both the females and the males respect Grant and look to him for example of manhood. However, internally Grant struggles with his manhood just like Jefferson, and for many of the same reasons. Grant refuses to go to Jefferson’s trial saying, “I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be. Still, I was there. I was

there as much as anyone else" (1). Grant's weakness to become a man and his fear of continuing his process towards manhood lie in his experience with white society. As a teacher, he encounters daily the racism and injustice towards Black children. At the same time, he sees the cycle that young Black males fall victim to. Manhood becomes a means to leave the plantation, but many fail. So when Grant says that he did not go to the trial, but he is there it is because he is part of the same cycle that victimizes Jefferson. He predicts the outcome because he lives in the same fear that he also will be judged and convicted by whites that he is not a man. Grant's fear leads him back to the plantation that he once left and he is able to disguise his fear of not being a man by being a teacher and ignoring outside society.

As Grant meets with Emma, it becomes clear that she has one goal for her godson, to make him be the male who breaks the cycle on their plantation by becoming a man. Before she finishes speaking, Grant notices the pain on her face. The pain is beyond just the trial, but a lifetime of fighting for Jefferson to be a man. Grant comments, "Her large, dark face showed all the pain she had gone through this day, this past weekend. No. The pain I saw in that face came from many years past" (13). As an older woman, Emma has watched many males fail in finding their manhood. Grant himself will comment later on the large number of Black male youths who leave the plantation, only to die young or return in defeat.

Emma begins her plea to Grant to help Jefferson become a man saying: "I don't want them to kill no hog. I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet" (13). Herman Beavers comments on this scene, "But rather than contesting the fact that the trial has been a travesty or that Jefferson is sentence to die for a crime he has not

committed, the most devastating issue for Miss Emma is the implication that Jefferson is not fit to be considered a man" (14). Emma does not want Jefferson to ignore his calling to be a man. She still sees the potential he has, and she wants him to reach his manhood before his death. Yes, she can accept his supposed crime and its consequences, but she cannot accept Jefferson's dying before he has a chance to discover his manhood.

Initially, Grant resists Emma's pleas for him to help Jefferson become a man. He tells Miss Emma, "What do you want me to do? What can I do? It's only a matter of weeks, a couple of months, maybe. What can I do that you haven't done the past twenty-one years?" (13). The more Emma and his aunt Tante Lou insist that Grant is a teacher and should teach Jefferson to be a man, the angrier he becomes. He tells the women, "Yes, I'm the teacher. And I teach what the white folks around here tell me to teach--reading, writing, and 'rithmetic. They ever told me how to keep a black boy out of a liquor store" (13). Grant does not want to see Jefferson because he knows it will lead him to address his own fears and insecurities in his manhood. He has learned how to function in White society and behave like the Whites want him to. Similar to Jefferson, Grant does not want to challenge the notion that he can be more. He accepts his role as teacher in the plantation and teaches what he is told to teach, never questioning that his acceptance obstructs his manhood.

Grant's fear to address his manhood and his acceptance of White domination is evident is his anger towards his aunt. He knows she wants him to be more than the plantation teacher and she sees this opportunity as a chance for him to prove to the plantation that he can be more. But Grant refuses to understand thinking to himself: " I had told her many, many times how much I hated this place and all I wanted to do was

get away. I told her I was no teacher, I hated teaching, and I was just running in place here" (15). Although Grant understands the role his aunt desires him to fulfill he is not ready to address his manhood. He knows he is "running in place here," yet he refuses to leave the plantation. Grant's fear at overcoming the expectations for him allow him to stay on the plantation and hide from his confrontation to be a man.

Miss Emma's wishes for Jefferson to be a man, and Grant's dismay and anger towards the women continue with their visit to Henri Pichot's house. Pichot, the plantation owner, is the brother-in-law of the sheriff and can potentially influence him to allow both Miss Emma and Grant to visit Jefferson more often. However, in her desires to see her godson reach his manhood, Miss Emma unknowingly suppresses Grant's manhood further. Grant clings to his accomplishment of leaving the plantation and receiving his education, his means to manhood. He tells Tante Lou at their arrival to Pichot's house, "It was you who said you never wanted me to go through that back door again" (17). Even his aunt knows that Grant has taken steps to become a man by educating himself beyond the common worker at the plantation. Furious that he must regress, Grant says to himself, "I had not come through that back door once since leaving the university, ten years before. I had been teaching on the place going on six year, and I had not been in Pichot's yard, yet alone up the back stairs or through that back door" (19). Part of Grant's success as a student, and now teacher, is his belief that he will never have to step back on the plantation as a lower class. He naively believes that his education alone proves his manhood, but now with Jefferson's arrest and conviction, Grant is beginning to understand that he must do more. He has to rise above White expectations even if he must, at first, cater to their bantering. For it is the White male's

treatment of Jefferson and himself that will insight Grant's anger and, eventually, lead him to discover his manhood.

The conversation at Mr. Pichot's and his reaction to Emma's request are as expected. Miss Emma pleads with Mr. Pichot: "They called my boy a hog, Mr. Henri. I didn't raise no hog, and I don't want no hog to go set in that chair. I want a man to go set in that chair, Mr. Henri" (20). Emma not only wants Jefferson to become a man before he dies, but she wants the public to know that she has raised him well. She does not want the plantation to think she is responsible for another male's failing to become a man, but she wants them to know that she has taught Jefferson, and never has abandoned hope, that his manhood can be achieved. At Emma's request to allow Grant to teach Jefferson, Mr. Pichot directs his comments to Grant. Grant observes, "I was too educated for Henri Pichot; he had no use for me at all anymore" (21). Pichot supports Grant's belief when he tells Grant to allow Reverend Mose to visit Jefferson, instead of himself. Reverend Mose is a man who Pichot knows he can control. By disguising his weakness in religion, White society accepts Mose because their society can still dominate him. Unlike Grant, Mose accepts his role as a Black preacher and does not question the motives and decisions of White males. However even in his belief that he threatens Pichot, Grant does not see Pichot's distrust as strength. He does not use this power to progress in the steps to reach his manhood, but continues to hide in his fear. Agreeing with Pichot, Grant comments that he does not know if he can reach Jefferson before he dies. Grant does not argue with Pichot but reaffirms his belief that Jefferson cannot be reached, thus again victimizing both himself and Jefferson by suppressing their manhood.

Grant's reaction to his visit with Mr. Pichot emphasizes his cowardice. Rather than address Jefferson or the women's wishes for him to teach him, Grant flees to Bayonne where he can hide in a bar, The Rainbow Room, and wait for his girlfriend, Vivian. Vivian, Grant's supporter and encourager, patiently listens as he pleads with her to leave the city now. He tells Vivian that he wants to leave that night saying, "Commitment to what—to live and die in this hellhole, when we can leave and live like other people?" (29). Although Grant talks about leaving, he knows that Vivian will never leave her commitment as a teacher and her children. Grant's desires to leave the city and the plantation, and his belief that he can leave at any time without fear or resentment convinces himself that he is a man. He tells Vivian, "I need to go someplace where I can feel like I'm living. I don't want to spend the rest of my life teaching school in a plantation church…I don't feel alive here. I'm not living here" (29). The more Grant talks about leaving the plantation, the more he can fool himself into believing he is a man. However, if he chooses to leave the plantation, Grant knows he will fail Jefferson, as well as himself. The plantation and the school are Grant's safety zones, and he knows that he is not ready to leave their comfort and discover his manhood apart from the people that know him.

Grant's realization that he cannot escape his role to teach Jefferson leads him to direct his anger towards Jefferson and away from the justice system that places him in jail. He tells Vivian, "The public defender… called him a dumb animal. He said it would be like tying a hog down into that chair and executing him…Now his godmother wants me to visit him and make him know--prove to these white men--that he's not a hog, that's he's a man. I'm supposed to make him a man. Who am I?" (31). Grant understands

Emma's desires to show the White males that Jefferson is a man because Grant possesses the same wishes for himself. He wants to be the man on the plantation that shows white society that despite their oppression and poverty a Black male can become a man. However, now as Grant faces the decision to actually fulfill these needs to reach his manhood, he hesitates asking Vivian, "Who am I?" Grant is letting is fear direct his decision, he does not want to have to examine his life, teaching Jefferson to be a man, when he does not yet know how to be one himself.

Grant's fear is further seen in his ridicule of Jefferson. He tells Vivian even if he succeeds in reaching Jefferson, "He's still going to die. The next day, the next week, the next month. So what will I have accomplished? What will I have done? Why not let the hog die without knowing anything?" (31). In his weakness, Grant begins to listen to White society. In his past, he has returned to the plantation to teach, despite his cries that he will be more. Now, he excuses his own frustration by accepting the opinion that Jefferson cannot be educated because he is a "hog." Carlyle Thompson comments, "Gaines uses the word 'hog' fifty-two times in the novel" (281). Gaines knows the severity of such of word to Black males. By comparing them to animals, White society is telling Black individuals that they cannot be men because they are lesser humans. Grant, by using the word "hog," becomes both oppressor and victim. He is a victim because he allows White males to dictate his life which, ironically, makes him oppress Jefferson. It is Grant's own fear and anger that makes him resist seeing Jefferson. He knows the two males are in the same battle, to reach their manhood, and Grant is not yet ready to confront his fears.

The next day Grant returns to Pichot's kitchen, continuing the suppression of his manhood. Yes, he has to go to the kitchen to learn if he can visit Jefferson, but his encounters with the White males lead him to further question if he can be a man. As he waits in the kitchen for over two hours, Grant becomes irritated towards Mr. Pichot and the sheriff as they eat, drink, and continue their conversation, all while Grant waits in the kitchen. By himself, Grant refuses to allow the males to have power over him, even refusing their food saying, "I was hungry…But I would not eat at Henri Pichot's kitchen table. I had come through the back door against my will, and it seemed that he and the sheriff were doing everything they could to humiliate me… but I damned sure would not add hurt to injury by eating at his table" (46). Grant is aware that the two are trying to suppress his manhood by ignoring him in the kitchen. They keep Grant separate from their table, make him use the back door, and now expect him to wait patiently as they discuss him and Jefferson.

Despite his awareness, Grant's confidence wavers as the males finally arrive in the kitchen. He thinks to himself, "I tried to decide how to respond to them. Whether I should act like the teacher I was, or like the nigger that I was supposed to be" (47). Grant knows that White males expect him to behave a certain way, and he is willing to sacrifice his manhood to do so. Grant is a college-educated but allows the two males to patronize his success as they question his motive and his speaking. When Grant responds that it is Emma, not he, who wants to make Jefferson a man, Sheriff Guidry asks, "Make him a man for what?" (49). Already Grant admits defeat by saying he does not want to make Jefferson a man. Grant knows that if he allows himself to connect with Jefferson's path to manhood, that he will have to confront the white males before him, and he is not ready.

Rather, he answers the same questions as before and admits to Guidry, "Believe me, Mr. Guidry, if it was up to me, I wouldn't have anything to do with it at all" (49). Grant furthers distance himself from the situation by trying to win approval from the White males. Although he believes he deserves better treatment, Grant avoids the opportunity to show Pichot and Guidry that males from the plantation can be men. Grant even stays quiet when Guidry tells him, "I'd rather see a contended hog go to that chair than an aggravated hog. There ain't a thing you can put in that skull that ain't there already" (50). Eventually, Guidry agrees that Grant may see Jefferson, but only because he has a bet with Pichot that Grant will fail. The two are confident that Grant and Jefferson will be unsuccessful in their pursuit to become men. Pichot and Guidry already suppress Jefferson by placing him in jail, and Grant by the ridicule in the kitchen. They know in order for Grant and Jefferson to be men they will have to ignore White society's view of them, and they are certain that neither male can do that.

Grant's humiliation by White males and his oppression of manhood continue the next day when the superintendent visits his school. Grant preps his students for Mr. Joseph's arrival reminding them to bathe every morning and rehearse their school drills. Grant wants to prove to Mr. Joseph that he is a man because he is a successful teacher. But just as his education has failed him in the past, it fails him now when Mr. Joseph refuses to acknowledge Grant's progress with the students. Immediately, Mr. Joseph derides Grant's teaching position by treating him with apathy and referring to him as "Mr. Higgins", instead of his real last name, Wiggins. Because Mr. Joseph does not acknowledge Grant as a man or his work with the students, Grant's hesitation to become a man expands. Grant tries to ignore this mockery, but his distress grows while Mr.

Joseph not only quizzes the children, but inspects their physical appearance as well. Grant comments, "And besides looking at hands, now he began inspecting teeth…At the university I had read about slave masters who had done the same when buying new slaves, I had read of cattlemen doing it when purchasing horses and cattle" (56). Grant's shame spreads as he watches his students become an object, the very horror that Grant is trying to escape. However, just as his fear does not allow him to leave the plantation or visit Jefferson, he says nothing as the children are studied and scoffed. After Mr. Joseph praises Grant for his, "excellent crop of students," Grant says, "But instead of feeling pride, I hated myself for drilling them as I had done" (57). Grant prepares his students for Mr. Joseph's arrival, hoping that their intelligence and appearance will prompt Mr. Joseph to acknowledge Grant's manhood. Because of Mr. Joseph's apathy, Grant's plan fails and he not only suppresses his manhood further, but the children's hope as well. Mr. Joseph still does not give the children newer books or supplies but hurries away to another school. As he drives away, Grant still waves goodbye to the man who has just humiliated him and his students. Similar to the episode in the kitchen, Grant desires approval from White males, even after they become determined to destroy his self-esteem and manhood.

After Mr. Joseph leaves the school, Grant becomes weaker as he once again questions himself, "What am I doing? Am I reaching them at all?" (62). The same cycle that Grant is rebelling against, and Miss Emma desires Jefferson to break, haunts Grant as he watches the children chop wood outside, just has he has once done. Grant's fear of leaving the plantation is further explained as he comments, "And I remembered others too….They had chopped wood here too; then they were gone. Gone to the fields, to the

small towns, to the cities--where they died" (62). For years now, Grant has watched his male friends and students try to leave the plantation and fail. No male succeeds in reaching manhood, but rather he stays on the plantation and ignores his desires or attempts to leave and is killed by the outside world. For Grant, if he attempts to leave the plantation, there is a possibility that he will also fail. The people expect Grant to be the one to break the cycle, and that responsibility is too overwhelming for him. Because he is overwhelmed by his own fears, Grant does not want to see Jefferson, fearing that he may fail the people, Jefferson, and himself.

Grant's fear confines him to plantation life and teaching in the church, the very work that he was told to escape years before by his old teacher, Matthew Antoine. Grant's teacher hates Grant because he desires to be more. As a youth, Grant is confident that he can reach his manhood by leaving the plantation. But just as Grant later will, Antoine has seen many male students fail at their attempts to become a man. Grant reflects on Antoine, "The others believed what he said. They went out into the fields, went into the small towns and into the cities and died. So you think you can, he said. So you think you can? No he did not say it with words, only with his eyes. You will be a loser, my friend" (63). Antoine's belief that Grant too will fail drives him away from the plantation to receive his education. And he sees the reaction to his decision in Antoine, "I could still see the hatred in him" (63). Eventually, the two reach a mutual hatred for each other based on their disdain of the plantation male's failure. Grant comments, "He hated me, and I knew it, and he knew I knew it. I didn't like him, but I needed him, needed him to tell me something that none of the others could or would" (64). Grant needs to learn directly from a male who fails himself by not reaching his manhood. Antoine has done

the very move that he mocks others for doing; he returns to the plantation and teaches the students. His hatred stems from his belief that Grant may have the power to break the cycle, but he refuses to allow himself to do so. As much as Antoine tells Grant not to return to the plantation and teach, he still does, falling victim to the same cycle that Antoine does.

This background of white humiliation and failing is on Grant's mind when he first visits Jefferson. When he arrives at the jail, Grant continues to be subject to White males as they search and question him. Thompson writes, "Grant's initial visit with Miss Emma to the incarcerated Jefferson continues the teacher's humiliation and emasculation by white male authority figures" (292). At the same time, Jefferson's character becomes weaker, just like Grant's. Initially, Jefferson refuses to even speak to Emma or Grant but sits and stares at the ceiling as his godmother tries to engage him in conversation. Eventually Jefferson says, "Nothing don't matter" (73). Any desires Jefferson may have once possessed to be a man are annihilated because he has become subject to White males. There is no encouragement in Jefferson's life but only death that waits him as he stays locked in his cell. Although Grant is on the outside, he too has locked himself in a cell by becoming subject to White males. Neither of the two question White authority or attempt to rise above expectation. Jefferson believes he cannot do so because he is in jail, but Grant believes he cannot do so because of cowardice.

Both men immediately feel a connection between their struggles, although Grant tries to ignore it. Grant says, "Then he looked at me. You know what I'm talking about, don't you, his eyes said. They were big brown eyes, the whites too reddish. You know, don't you, his eyes said again. I looked back at him. My eyes would not dare answer him.

But his eyes knew that my eyes knew" (73). The two men, although in different situations, feel the same discouragement and dissatisfaction in life. Both of them see themselves as failures because they believe there is no hope for them to be men. Initially, Jefferson becomes angry with Grant because he ignores their connection, refusing to answer his eyes. He asks Grant, "You with 'em" (74). Jefferson knows that the people at the plantation expect more from Grant, and he is angry that Grant is continuing to fail both himself and the other plantation males. By asking him if you were with the White males, Jefferson questions Grant's motives for visiting him. Jefferson does not yet understand that Grant needs to see Jefferson become a man before he can reach his manhood. Grant's education is not enough but he needs an example to follow. The cycle of oppression cannot break with Grant, but it can potentially end with Jefferson if he is able to achieve his manhood in the prison, before his death.

After this first visit with Jefferson, Grant tries to convince his aunt not to have him go again. The connection he has with Jefferson creates more fear in Grant, and he is still not ready to address that fear. He tells Tante Lou, "Everything you sent me to school for, you're stripping me of….Years ago, Professor Antoine told me that if I stayed here, they were going to break me down to the nigger I was born to be. But he didn't tell me that my aunt would help them do it" (79). Because Grant has yet to address his own insecurities, he relies on his excuse that education will find his manhood. It is easy for him to remind the women that he has once left the plantation and that he has, at least, tried to become a man. Later that day, at his meeting alone with Jefferson, Grant is disgusted when Jefferson tries to excuse himself for not being a man. Jefferson turns away from the food Emma sends, telling Grant, "I'm an old hog. Youmans don't stay in

no stall like this. I'm an old hog they fattening up to kill" (83). Just like education is Grant's reason for not attempting to find his manhood, Jefferson's imprisonment becomes his excuse for failing to be a man. Although Grant tells him, "You're not a hog. You're a man" (83), Jefferson has the same reaction that Grant displays earlier. He refuses to answer Grant but sits in silence, almost mocking Grant for his answer. Finally, Grant cannot take the silence any longer and tells Jefferson, "You want me to stay away and let him win? The white man? You want him to win?" (84). The connection between the two deepens as Grant sits watching Jefferson refusing to speak. Grant is beginning to realize that he is letting the White male win. He has refused to contradict the treatment of his students, his humiliation while standing in the kitchen, or the obvious disapproval of Pichot and Guidry. Instead, Grant has hidden behind the belief that he can be a man because he is educated. However, as he watches Jefferson and becomes angry with him, Grant knows that both males must overcome the opposition of White superiors. They can become men, but they will have to learn from each other and be an example for each other of the strength they will need to confront their fears.

After Grant leaves Jefferson, he is angry for some time. Grant releases his anger by lashing out at Vivian, his aunt, the Reverend, and Emma. His fear to become a man prohibits his growing from his experience with Jefferson. Phillip Auger comments, "Grant's own situation is somewhat similar to Jefferson's in that both he and Jefferson are undergoing a profound change in their own self-perceptions" (76). Jefferson's change can only happen when Grant is ready to address his own uncertainties of becoming a man. When Grant is ready, he can return to the jail and finally reach Jefferson. And Grant does become ready to return to the prison saying , "Between Monday when I talked to

Miss Emma, and Friday, when I visited Jefferson again, something had happened inside me and I wasn't so angry anymore" (125). Grant is ready to expand his relationship with Jefferson. He has tried to resist a friendship, knowing that it will lead him to address his fears. But now, after he releases his anger, Grant returns to the prison and wants to know about Jefferson. He asks Paul, a deputy, about Jefferson's routine and behavior. Grant wants to know about Jefferson's day so he can become Jefferson. Grant must allow himself the understanding he needs to teach and guide Jefferson to reach his manhood. Now Grant, as well as the plantation people, need Jefferson to become a man so they all can learn. Grant is finally ready to teach Jefferson and, at the same time, learn to become a man.

Grant first tries to reach Jefferson by asking him to treat his godmother better. Jefferson still refuses to talk to Emma or anyone else that comes to visit. Grant tells Jefferson, "You can keep her from crying. You can make it easier for her. You can do me that favor" (128). Grant is asking Jefferson to reach his manhood by possessing qualities of a man. The first attribute he is asking Jefferson to exemplify is self-sacrifice. Jefferson is tortured by his situation and releases that anger on his aunt and friends. However, Grant wants Jefferson to ignore his own pain and focus on the hardships he is causing his godmother. Baab comments, "Like Grant, Jefferson is so angry, so angry in fact, that he cannot express his rage except to turn it inward or on those who love him" (127). Grant is asking Jefferson to let go of his anger and focus on the love of his godmother. At first, Jefferson is not ready to accept the characteristics of a man telling Grant, "I'm go'n die anyhow" (129). The more Grant tries to convince Jefferson that he should not focus on his death but focus on his godmother's happiness, the angrier Jefferson becomes. Finally

Grant leaves the cell, but he has laid the foundation for Jefferson to accept responsibility and become a man.

The next day, Grant returns to the prison with Emma to visit with Jefferson. Jefferson's attitude is no different from the day before. He still refuses to talk to his godmother or eat the food she prepares. Grant pleads with Jefferson to eat the food, insisting that he is hungry, until Jefferson asks him, "What do you want?" When Jefferson asks Grant, he notices, "His reddened eyes accused me of wanting something without saying it" (138). Jefferson knows that Grant wants him to take on the characteristics of man not just for himself, but for Grant as well. Grant wants Jefferson to become a man so he can finally have an example of manhood. However, Jefferson still clings to his anger and will not listen to Grant's pleas. Jefferson still believes the notion that he is not human but a hog. Grant tells him, "No matter how bad off we are, we still owe something. You owe something, Jefferson. Not to me. Surely not to the sheriff out there. But to your godmother. You must show her some understanding, some kind of love" (139). Jefferson continues to tell Grant that he cannot be a man because he is a hog, not a "youman." To convince Jefferson that he is a man, Grant must first convince Jefferson that he is a human. Jefferson's anger expands beyond Grant's frustration towards the cycle of oppression. His spirit is completely broken because he has not only been told that he is not a man but he is also an animal. Jefferson not only has to rise above the White males' expectations, but he must also convince himself that he is human.

It is not until the date is set for Jefferson's execution that he begins to listen to Grant's pleas to become a man. The day his death is determined, the hope that Grant is building for himself to be a man is weakened. He returns to his earlier belief that the

White males will continue his control over Black males especially Black males like Jefferson. He says, "They sentence you to death because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, with no proof you had anything at all to do with the crime other than being there when it happened. Yet six months later they come and unlock your cage and tell you, We, us, white folks all, have decided it's time for you to die" (158). Grant's reaction to the news is similar to his earlier reactions when his manhood is questioned; he leaves the plantation and finds Vivian.

While at the bar, Grant releases all his frustration to Vivian, defining the cycle that he is a victim to. Grant believes that since slavery, Black males are failing their females. They are all broken, but the females keep hope that one male will eventually become a man and prove to the others that manhood can be reached. Grant tells Vivian, "So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious circle--which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and maybe even tries to change it, it is too heavy a burden because of all the others who have run away and left their burdens behind" (167). Grant knows the women on the plantation hope that he will be the one to break the circle, but he tells Vivian, "…they want to hold on as long as they can. Not realizing their holding on will break me to. That in order for me to be what they think I am, what they want me to be, I must run as others have done in the past" (167). Grant knows that the circle can be broken only with Jefferson. He has tried but has failed by running away from the burden. But Jefferson cannot run, and he can show the females that there is a male from their plantation that is breaking the circle.

When Grant visits Jefferson after the date is set, he begins to see a changed male. Jefferson is finally willing to talk to Grant and ask him questions about the plantation.

Grant is able to build his relationship with Jefferson by talking about his last meal. Jefferson tells Grant, "I want a whole gallona ice cream. Eat it with a pot spoon…ain't never had much ice cream. Never had more than a nickel cone…but now I'm go'n get me a whole gallon" (170). Thompson posits, "Grant's visit to Jefferson, after the setting of the date for the execution, marks the turning point in Jefferson's journey to manhood" (299). Jefferson's journey begins with an established relationship with Grant. The two males begin to talk not only about ice cream but about music and radio programs. Before he leaves, Grant promises Jefferson that he will bring him a radio the next day. But as he leaves, Grant comments, "He didn't have anything more to say. He sat there, not looking out the window now but looking down at the floor, as if he had forgotten about the radio, the ice cream, about Gable--about everything" (172). As much as Grant wants to connect with Jefferson and guide him towards manhood, it is still a struggle that Jefferson must undergo internally. While Grant is there, Jefferson is able to feel confident that he will be able to fulfill some of his desires. But as Grant leaves and Jefferson is again alone, Jefferson must examine his wishes for manhood, and eventually, the decision to be a man rests solely with himself.

As promised, Grant brings the radio to the prison the next day. That same day, Emma and the Reverend visit Jefferson who still refuses to speak to them but only listens to his radio. The radio becomes a sign of hope for Jefferson. It is a reminder that another male cares for him and is undergoing the same struggle at the same time. Grant knows the connection the two males now have and tells the Reverend, "Last Friday was the first time, the very first time, that Jefferson looked at me without hate, without accusing me of putting him in that cell….I found a way to reach him" (182). Although the radio may

seem small to the Reverend and Miss Emma, it is a large step for both Grant and Jefferson. Grant is able to establish trust with Jefferson by fulfilling a promise, and Jefferson is able to spend his time listening to the radio, remembering that he now is friends with another male. Keith Clark states, “The word ‘intimacy’ might aptly connote what is so painstakingly absent in black men’s relationship with each other” (20). Except for his relationship with Vivian, Grant has yet to establish with anyone else the intimacy he has with Jefferson. Both males look to each other, not just as friends, but as hope that one of them will break the cycle. They now know that together manhood can be reached. The intimacy is shared not only with the radio but later that day when Grant visits Jefferson with presents from the children. As he leaves, Jefferson tells Grant to thank the children for the pecans, to which Grant responds, “I held out my hand. He raised his. A big hand, but with no grip. Cool, dead weight. I squeezed his big hand with both of mine” (186). Although Jefferson may still see himself as weak, Grant is willing to support him in his journey to manhood. He wants to see Jefferson succeed, and although Jefferson may still be weak now, Grant promises with their handshake to be his strength when needed.

Grant continues to teach Jefferson the next day when he visits with Miss Emma. Initially, Jefferson is still too weak to eat the food or talk to his godmother, but Grant pulls Jefferson aside and gives a lesson on heroes. Grant already knows that Jefferson will be a hero to the plantation if he becomes the first to break the circle. But Jefferson is not yet aware of the responsibility of becoming a man. He does not yet understand that the entire plantation is waiting for him to reach his manhood. Grant tells Jefferson, “A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men

don't and can't do. He's different than other men. He is above other men. No matter who those men are, the hero, no matter who he is, is above them" (191). If Jefferson reaches his manhood and becomes a hero to the plantation, then he will be above his White oppressors. Grant is teaching Jefferson that a man is not determined by other males but by himself. He alone can make the decision if he wants to become a man or ignore the calling like other males from the plantation. Grant encourages Jefferson to be more than expected of him saying, "I want you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To them, you're nothing but a nigger--no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong. You can do more than I can ever do" (192). Grant knows he is still too weak to overcome the white men, like Pichot and Guidry, to reach his manhood. However, he believes that Jefferson can. Already, Jefferson has risen above the belief that he is only a hog and now listens as Grant guides him to understand that he is a man.

Grant finally admits to Jefferson that he wants him to be a man because he needs to learn from him. He tells Jefferson, "I need you much more than you could ever need me. I need to know what to do with my life…I need someone to tell me what to do. I need you to tell me, to show me…You have the chance of being bigger than anyone who has ever lived on that plantation or come from this little town" (193). Grant's cowardice still does not allow him to confront his fears. However, in a small way, he can gain success if Jefferson becomes a man. Auger posits, "Grant realizes that the powerlessness of Jefferson is, in fact, not so different from the powerlessness he himself feels" (59). The only difference between their powerlessness is that Grant believes Jefferson can overcome his. He has already seen Jefferson mature from a weak male who ignores his

godmother, to a male that sits and eats with her. Watching Jefferson finally eat his godmother's food, Grant knows that he can overcome his obstacles and become a man.

As Jefferson and Grant's friendship continues to grow, Jefferson is able to tell Grant that he is still unsure of his manhood. He tells Grant, "Y'all asking a lot, Mr. Wiggins, from a poor old nigger who never had nothing" (222). Up to this point, Jefferson has believed the success of a male is in his possessions or intelligence. He sees Grant as man because he is respected, but now he understands that becoming a man means more. However, Jefferson still carries some of his earlier anger because he must sacrifice himself for the plantation males. He must accept his death for a crime he did not commit so other males can see him be strong. Jefferson tells Grant, "Me, Mr. Wiggins. Me. Me to take the cross. Your cross, nannan's cross, my own cross. Me, Mr. Wiggins. This old stumbling nigger. Y'all axe a lot Mr. Wiggins. Who ever car'd my cross?" (224). Although Jefferson understands his need to become a man, he is still fearful of death and hesitates about accepting the responsibility. It is too much for him to become a man alone, but now he knows he has to become a man for his godmother and Grant. If he fails, Jefferson not only prohibits himself from being a man before his death but weakens Grant's own pursuit to reach his manhood.

It is not until Jefferson is able to write his thoughts in his journal that he reaches his manhood. Baab contends, "Gaines's decision to give Jefferson a written method of expression does more than allow him his silence throughout the novel, a silence that tells readers the depth of his lawyer's insults and the degree of Jefferson's rage" (121). In his journal, Jefferson is able to work through his anger and his fears to become a man. Finally, Jefferson can write about his nightmares, his hesitations about death, and his

doubts that he will ever be a man. By addressing these issues, Jefferson releases his insecurities and becomes strong enough to take up his cross and the cross of the males at the plantation. As the day gets closer for Jefferson to die, he begins to get stronger in his journal. Initially he writes about his fears, but now he writes about his strength. Jefferson becomes an example of power when Grant brings Vivian, the school children, and Miss Emma to see him. Jefferson writes about Miss Emma, "I tol her I love her an I love her I ws strong an she jus look ole and tied an pull me to her an kiss me an it was the firs time she never done that an it felt good an I let her hol me long is she want cause you say it was good for an I told her I was strong and she didn't need to come back no mo" (231). Before, Jefferson can not even talk to Miss Emma because of his anger, but now he allows her to hold him and express her love for him. However, Jefferson also knows he must let her go. He has to tell her that he is a man before she leaves, and he does. Jefferson is able to honestly convey that he is finally the man she desires him to be. Even during his final hours, Jefferson continues to write in his journal that he is strong. He may be physically shaking, but he is mentally strong. He writes to Grant, "good by mr wigin tell them im strong tell them im a man" (234). It is important for Jefferson to save Grant for his last goodbye. He must tell Grant that he has succeeded in becoming a man, and now Grant is able to as well. Jefferson wants Grant to tell the plantation that he is a man because he has accepted the responsibility. He is no longer afraid to break the circle but is willing to take the burden from all males, and he becomes the man they have been waiting for.

All doubts that Grant still has about Jefferson are erased when the deputy, Paul, arrives with Jefferson's journal. Outside the school, Grant waits for news of Jefferson's

death, still overcome with doubts of his own manhood. Grant focuses on the hope that Jefferson is able to stay strong during his death and prove his manhood to the white males, “Yet they must believe. They must believe, if only to free the mind, if not the body. Only when the mind is free has the body a chance to be free. Yes they must believe, must believe. Because I know what it means to be a slave. I am a slave” (251). Jefferson has to stay a man in his death for the people, and Grant, to be free. If Jefferson fails, Grant stays a slave to himself and to his White oppressors. However if Jefferson becomes a man and overcomes the White males’ expectations, then Grant can also succeed.

Paul arrives to give Grant the news he needs to overcome his doubts; Jefferson is a man. Paul tells Grant, “He was the strongest man in that crowded room, Grant Wiggins. He was, he was. I’m not saying this to ease your pain…he was the strongest man there…he looked at the preacher and said, ‘Tell Nannan I walked. And straight he walked…I’m a witness. Straight he walked” (254). When Grant receives the news that he has been waiting to hear, that the circle is broken, sadness overcomes him. Jefferson has to be sacrificed for the males on the plantation to find their manhood. The society will still oppress the Black males and treat them unfairly, but there is now hope. There is an example of one male who stands in the face of adversity and becomes a man. For the first time since Jefferson’s death, Grant allows himself to cry. Through his tears, Grant releases his own fears of becoming a man and regains his confidence that, like Jefferson, he too will rise above expectations and reach manhood.

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