HEADLANDS AND QUARTERS: LOUISIANA IN

Catherine Carmier

by Thadious M. Davis

In a 1971 address at Southern University, Ernest Gaines has revealed his primary impetus for beginning to write fiction: "I wanted to smell that Louisiana earth, feel that Louisiana sun, sit under the shade of one of those Louisiana oaks, search for pecans in that Louisiana grass in one of those Louisiana yards next to one of those Louisiana bayous, not far from a Louisiana river." It does not seem surprising to learn that his writing began with an initial consideration of place, rather than with character or incident. That Louisiana earth with its oaks, bayous, and rivers all dominate Gaines’s first novel, published in 1964 as Catherine Carmier, but started in 1949 as "A Little Stream," a title adhering to his conception of place at the center of his imaginative impulse. This particular Louisiana becomes central to all of Gaines’s subsequent works, but only in Catherine Carmier is the development of the fiction—its setting, characterizations, themes, symbols, and structure—so dependent upon the land and its actual and perceived meanings.

"I think that Louisiana’s probably the most romantic and interesting of all southern states," Gaines has remarked in a 1974 conversation with Ruth Laney, "the land, the language, the colors, the bayous, the fields—all of these things together, the combination of these things, I think, make it an extremely interesting place." The terrain of his Louisiana, which is based upon that of his native Pointe Coupee Parish, is bounded on three sides by water: on the east the Mississippi River, on the north Old River, and on the west the Atchafalaya. On the south, Iberville and West Baton Rouge parishes form the boundary. Within these borders are Lake Moreau, Raccouri Bend, False River, where Gaines was baptized, and the many bayous (Couteau, Moreau, Latanache, Cow Head, etc.) that from the time of Samuel Lockett’s definitive 1869 geographical and topographical survey have remained "beautiful lands . . . possess[ing] many peculiar charms": "gentle slopes, turfed to the water’s edge"; "coast . . . shaded by stately groves of oaks, sycamores, and gums"; dominated by forty-five miles of the Mississippi’s "quiet, smooth, transparent expanses." What Lockett surveyed after the Civil War and what Gaines saw growing up before World War II are much the same physical space that George Washington Cable observed in 1884, as "a wild and solemn beauty . . . which appeals to the imagination with special strength." Cable, one of the first nationally-known writers to recognize the richness of Louisiana as fictional sub-
ject, also emphasized the same unique features of the land that have attracted Ernest Gaines in this century: “the boughs of the dark, broad-spreading live-oaks, and the phantom-like arms of lofty cypresses, the long, motionless pendants of pale gray moss”; “on the banks of the large bayous, broad fields of corn, of cotton, of cane, of rice . . . pushing back the dark . . . curtain of moss-draped swamps”; and the “neat often imposing residence of the planter, the . . . double row of field-hands’ cabins, the tall red chimney and broad gray roof of the sugar houses, and . . . bagasse-burner.” Cable’s nineteenth-century description is still relevant to South Louisiana and to Gaines’s landscape, especially his plantations—the Grovers’s in Catherine Carmier, the Heberts’s in Of Love and Dust (1967), the Sampsons’s in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), and the Marshalls’s in A Gathering of Old Men (1983)—all of which have their literal basis in his boyhood home, River Lake Plantation of False River.

However, from his first novel, Ernest Gaines has transformed the physical landscape of his particular Louisiana into a psychological region in which his characters reflect the vivid palette and subtle shades of colors while they act out tense social dramas of individual, class, and caste struggle for survival. He uses the special characteristics of the land and the distinct groups of people shaped by that land—Creole and Anglo planters, Cajun overseers and tenant farmers, Creoles of color and black sharecroppers—in a literary work attuned to the dynamic interaction of spatial boundaries, agrarian traditions, temporal suspension, and racial identity. Catherine Carmier portrays blacks moving into the twentieth century—not at the turn of the nineteenth century, but at the dawning of an age of political consciousness. Yet in the heat of a Louisiana summer, everything is slowed down to a time that is seemingly not the present, but the past just emerging into the modern world.

Closed and time-bound, the quarters and fields of the Grover Plantation constitute a microcosm of society as Gaines understands it. Every house is within sight of every other; every resident known to one another. Carved out of the historical reality of the plantation system and inseparable from the fields enclosing them, the quarters exist both because of and in spite of that history. The home of slaves in the nineteenth century and of sharecroppers in the twentieth, the quarters are isolated from the larger world. Still dependent upon agriculture for a livelihood, the residents find themselves even more victimized by race in the present than they had been in the early decades of the twentieth century when it was still possible to make a living cropping the land with Creole cotton or Missouri sugar mules.
Technology and education are both new to the quarters and fields of the plantation. The modern technology brought to the fields by the Cajuns’ tractors and the college degree brought to the quarters by the protagonist Jackson Bradley mark the two poles of the outside world impinging upon the life of the plantation. Gaines has in these two poles the opportunity to explore the impact of place and tradition, of history and roots upon black characters who are forced to confront a changing world, and to do so not in terms of political activism or the fall of external barriers, but rather in terms of what happens to the interior of the human being—to the heart, mind, and will—when confronted with the reality of what it means to be black in a specified modern world.

Gaines addresses the complexity of impending modernity partly as a conflict between the past and the changing present, as some critics have already observed about the novel. However, by means of Jackson Bradley, Gaines also speculates about the psychological position of the reflective individual, who has learned to analyze the various positions both of self and others, of his own group or other groups within the parameters of his vision. The effect of a contemplative individual’s coming into contact with what it means to be black, what it means to become aware, through the process of emersion in the theories and practices, of the dominant white world as it responds to the otherness of black, provides the psychological backdrop for the action.

Importantly, then, the discoveries or failures in the novel do not issue from where the characters can go, which drinking fountains or lunch counters, schools or churches they can use, but instead they stem from the interior—who and what the individual is under the strain of transition, how the individual lives under the pressure of dislocation, where the individual must focus his or her loyalties and find values as the old world passes and is destroyed. Gaines’s novel, though it seems to be set in a much earlier time than its references to the Civil Rights Movement, to Freedom Riders and sit-ins suggest, is one of the first novels to portray the 1960s, not the movement and its impact as in the novel by another writer concerned with the rural South, Alice Walker’s Meridian, but the masses, ordinary blacks as they exist in a multi-layered, multi-colored environment. Louisiana’s time-locked class and caste organization becomes an ideal setting for the drama of the interior in Catherine Carmier.

Gaines structures his drama of the interior according to at least three distinct, yet intertwined patterns, all reiterative of the three primary groups of major actors—the blacks, the Creoles of color, and the Cajuns—who operate in the foreground, but who are dominated by
the presence of planter-class, land-owning whites in the background. Race and color, then, are keys to all of the patterns of meaning pervading the novel. The three patterns that provide immediate access to the action, themes, and symbols are: a pattern of encounters operating to help structure the action; a pattern of replacements forwarding the themes; and a pattern of beauty contrasted with death underscoring the metaphorical content. Though neither all-inclusive nor definitive, these patterns overlap and converge in making explicit the aesthetic impact of Louisiana in the novel.

The first of the three patterns is encounters, meetings and confrontations, which forward the action of the plot by bringing together individuals who are either from different groups or from the same group but who hold different perspectives. With Jackson Bradley at the center, it is developed literally as both encounters between insiders and outsiders and as individual confrontations with external barriers and internal awarenesses. From the opening pages when Brother, Jackson's childhood friend, and Catherine Carmier arrive to meet the bus bringing Jackson, who returns after ten years in California to confront the truth of his future by encountering the reality of his past, and Lillian Carmier, who returns for her last confrontation with her family before passing into the white world, characters meet one another from insider and outsider positions, and in effect, they confront the racial and class limitations of their lives.

Although the coming together in this pattern suggests thesis and antithesis, it is not dialectical, partly because synthesis does not occur, despite its possibility sometimes existing, and partly because each coming together depends upon ritualized or codified behavior that is inherently static. The formal structure of the action, then, is for the most part, mandated by historical caste and class relations to the land and by the social decorum appropriate to those hierarchical relationships. At the base of the major encounters is racial identity, which repeatedly becomes a catalyst in the meetings between individuals. For example, in the beginning section, Brother meets the two Cajuns, Paul and Francois Villon; Brother represents the displaced blacks who, though still living in the quarters, no longer have a place in the fields that have been their livelihood and inheritance, whereas Paul and Francois represent the Cajuns who are forwarding new farming methods and with them changing the community. While Brother is waiting to reclaim a part of his past, literally his friend Jackson, Paul and Francois are waiting to claim a new tractor that will further revolutionize their work on the land.

The Villon brothers and the other Cajuns have capitalized upon color, their main bond with white plantation owners, in order to gain the
best lands and to remove the blacks, by the quantity of their production and speed of their technology, from the fields and the quarters as well. Descended from the hundreds of Acadians who settled in Louisiana between 1764 and 1767 following a decade of temporary migrations after the British drove them out of Acadia, the Louisiana Cajuns, like their French peasant forebears, are primarily farmers and fishermen. In the early nineteenth century, they were the major group of independent farmers, petits habitants or paysans, and in the twentieth, they are frequently tenant farmers on large acreages, who by the 1950s were no longer working the land with mules and walking plows. In Catherine Carmier, Of Love and Dust, and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines carefully explains how, with their access to better lands and increased opportunities for higher yields and profits, the Cajuns have come to dominate agriculture on plantations. In Catherine Carmier, they plow their fields between the houses of the quarters and up to the doors of the blacks, but are insatiable, because they also tear down houses in the quarters as soon as a black family gives in and moves out. They are perhaps Gaines’s version of Faulkner’s Snopes, modern and acquisitive, scheming and aggressive; however, at the same time, the Cajuns are his transformational men who slake off the restrictions of their own past deprivations and are hardworking, productive people. Because as one character observes, “White is still white . . . And white still sticks with white,” the Cajuns will regenerate themselves, though at the expense of others, primarily blacks and Creoles of color. Yet, as Gaines illustrates in his portrait of Sidney Bonbon in Of Love and Dust, they, like both the blacks and the Creoles, are victims of the economic system and ethnic structure of Louisiana.

An important aspect of the encounters established by the presence of the Cajuns in Catherine Carmier is the relationship of the individual to the land, its customs and codes, to the spatial reality and psychological effect of racial or cast distinctions. The Cajuns, as Gaines uses them, force a reconsideration of the culture that they are destroying. Their operations force the residents of the quarters to acknowledge change and to question the future as the familiar culture becomes obsolete. The upheaval in the quarters, the visible legacy of slavery, means that the youths, the Catherines and the Jacksons, must retrieve what is valuable from the past and move into the twentieth century. The development forwarded by the Cajuns may have eroded the old ways, but at the same time, there is ambivalence at work, because the old ways are not necessarily presented as laudable or worth preserving. Implicit in Gaines’s portrait of the Cajuns is a criticism of the residents of the quarters who have perhaps been too complacent with their lives on the plantation. Certainly, they have not had the best lands, as Gaines
stresses, but neither have they moved forward from their nineteenth-century position of servitude, which is one truth that Jackson confronts upon his return.

Jackson crystallizes the tensions within the community, those between Cajuns and blacks, between Cajuns and Creoles, between blacks and Creoles, and blacks and other blacks, in his articulation of the external barriers and internal fragmentation separating individuals and groups. His metaphor of the wall is an extension of the surface structure of encounters. He has a hard-earned knowledge of the walls that separate the black individual not simply from the rest of the world, but from aspects of himself. His reunion with his aunt, Charlotte Moses, has precipitated a struggle to overcome their different notions of the common ground connecting them; his meeting with Catherine has inspired his determination to break through the barriers isolating individuals; his encounter with the racist practices of the plantation, especially the separate room for blacks in the back of the store and the destruction of the community by the Cajuns, has made him admit that racism is a reality. Jackson believes that a wall surrounds his life, but he persists in fighting it: "I saw the wall rising . . . it kept rising, and still I fought it . . . I don't believe in being walled. . . . I'd rather die than to live in hatred and fear." As he reveals the walls of racism that have surrounded his young manhood, Jackson implies as well the situation that has occurred in the lives of Raoul Carmier and the other blacks by extension: "Have you ever been surrounded by a brick wall? . . . One where there's no light at all?" The absence of light has been used throughout the novel to describe the Carmier house, so that in posing his question to Catherine Carmier, Jackson suggests the connection between his condition and that of the Carmiers. Jackson believes that before Catherine he was trapped by concrete and abstract barriers that forced him "to strain," "in order to see anything at all."

Jackson's repeated reference to a wall is symbolically extended to the wall separating Raoul Carmier's world of blacks; the wall established by the Creole of color to preserve his uniqueness and to assert his individuality becomes the wall that destroys his humanity and his opportunity for a meaningful life. The Creole is reduced to living in fear and in hatred. Walls intended to keep the outside world out, also function to keep the inside world sterile and fragmented. As Lillian Carmier observes, "Those in the city, Mama and Daddy, they're all strangers to me. There's a fence between us. I can see them, I can hear them, but I can't feel them." Raoul's and his family's attempt to keep the blacks and the whites from coming into contact with his world functions to create unanticipated barriers. What Raoul forgets is that the boundaries encircling the quarters—the physical and psychological
boundaries—enclose all of the people of color, and thus his attempt to establish artificial internal boundaries and create the crime of trespassing is ineffectual, even ludicrous. The quarters cannot finally be a place of trespassing by blacks, and any effort to confront Raoul's arbitrarily closed territory is within the right of any resident of the quarters.

Raoul's insubstantial claims to a third caste status in the present day world have a basis in Louisiana history. Louisiana was the only state to acknowledge in Bienville's 1724 Code Noir an official status for free persons of color, who had the rights of any citizen of French Louisiana, except marriage with and legacies from whites, though obviously actual social custom and practice usually maintained white superiority over any person of color. During the Spanish era, from 1766 to 1803, the gens des couleur libre had a thriving social and cultural life formulated upon being a distinct ethnic group within Louisiana; however, their position was always contingent upon being separate from both whites and blacks. The various color classifications (from sacatra to Sangmele or Octoroon) in colonial and antebellum records of Louisiana show that the gens des couleur libre formed a third caste in a separate racial group, and as such were accorded privileges, opportunities, and citizenship granted neither to other part-blacks outside the state nor to Louisiana's gens des couleur in other states. Gaines's Creoles of color, the Carmiers may be descended from the elite, cultured group in New Orleans that produced such literary figures as Armand Lanusse, who conceived and helped edit the first anthology of black verse in America (Les Cenelles, 1845), or Pierre Dalcour, Joanni Questry, Camille Thierry, Victor Séjour, all of whom wrote in French, just as did their counterparts in the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, Lucien Mansion and Adolphe Duhart, and in the twentieth century, Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes; or the Carmiers may be related to the Metoyers, who founded their own community on the Cane River and who have long been acknowledged as a distinct racial group by Louisianians, by historians (such as Gary Mills in The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color, 1977), and by sociologists (for instance Sister Frances Jerome Woods's Marginality and Identity: A Colored Creole Family Through Ten Generations, 1972). Gaines himself probably uses the Metoyers of Isle Brevelle, Cane River, as the origin of the community, Creole Place, and the family of Mary Agnes LeFabre in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, just as Lyle Saxon's 1937 novel Children of Strangers also treats the fictionalized Metoyers and their descendants on Melrose Plantation. However, Gaines's Carmiers are quite different from any of their possible ancestors; they are rural, uneducated tenant farmers and sharecroppers, who, by their refusal to recognize that for a century before Raoul Carmier's time Creoles
of color no longer had any official sanction, persist in empty, self-isolating forms.

The second of the patterns grows directly out of the encounters, meetings and confrontations of the action line; this pattern is that of replacements, which forwards the thematic meanings of the novel. Replacement carries with it the ideas of change, transition, and dislocation that relate both to the land itself and to the people inhabiting the land, but in addition, the pattern of replacement conveys messages of disruption, transference, and transformation. Replacements are the result of disruptions in the normal, traditional institutional and situational contexts of the characters' lives. The disruptions cause transferences to take place; some of the transferences are positive transcendencies of the old order and the old ways, but others are transformations that do not—perhaps do not yet—embody value judgments.

Replacements are prevalent throughout the novel: Cajuns replacing blacks as farmers on the plantation; houses in the quarters being replaced by fields; Raoul replacing his wife Della with his daughter Catherine; Charlotte replacing her missed experiences with those of her nephew Jackson. The central replacement theme of the novel, however, involves Jackson Bradley's relationship with Catherine Carmier. Early on in the development of the work, Madame Bayonne observes that her former student Jackson was "'always searching. Always wanted to find something strong—something...concrete.'" Though Jackson insists that he is "'not looking for a paradise,'" he does not disagree with Madame Bayonne's explanation of his search: "'I know what you are looking for. Dignity, truth—you want to make something out of a senseless world.'" He is, in fact, searching for something concrete in Louisiana, something to counter his experiences in San Francisco, something to replace the emptiness within him. Jackson makes Catherine the concrete objectification of his search and his subjective needs. He replaces his lack of direction and quest for meaning with Catherine, who becomes an external manifestation of the internal conflicts that he must resolve before he can reconcile what his life will be with what it has been. She becomes his external sign, intelligible and readable—perhaps to him alone—of what John Locke has called "'invisible ideas, which [man's] thoughts are made up of.'" Catherine makes it possible for Jackson's "'invisible ideas'" to become known not merely to others, but primarily to himself.

Attaining Catherine is a direct way of retrieving the past for him. This particular retrieval would eliminate the necessity of confronting either the black world of his aunt Charlotte or the white world of San Francisco, yet at the same time, it would necessitate a new beginning,
which is precisely what he wants—a means of escaping the unwanted legacies of his past. Catherine is, in all of its ambivalence, Jackson’s heart-felt response to place, to belonging and meaning, that Louisiana represents in the novel. His attraction to her reiterates what he had observed about Louisiana immediately after his arrival at his aunt’s house: “Everything . . . seemed strange, and yet very familiar.”

For Jackson, neither his aunt’s belief that things are as they were ten years before, nor Brother’s and Mary Louise’s patient attention to the elderly and to the past, nor Madame Bayonne’s metaphysical interpretation of individual meaning has any direct bearing on his need to be a black man with a sense of himself and his place in the world, essentially a man with a knowledge of his future based upon his past experiences in both the quarters of the Grover Plantation and in the city environment of San Francisco. His loss of faith is not a loss of religion as Charlotte believes, nor is it the result of his college education in the “North” as the residents of the quarters imply; it is, rather, his ability to see that life is what it is for blacks no matter where they live, that racism—publicly institutionalized or privately sanctioned—restricts the black person’s sense of self and future. Jackson’s perspective is realistic, but his youth (he is twenty-two) demands a romantic and idealistic solution to his dilemma. On a subconscious level, he believes that Catherine with her beauty, her strength, and her love will somehow provide an answer. His love for Catherine may be deeply felt, but it may also be calculated. By means of this strong emotion, Jackson may be able to transform his feelings of isolation and alienation, his feeling of drifting aimlessly, into positive motivation and direction, which could give meaning to his life and make bearable his existence in a society that will continue to be racist. His involvement with Catherine is of an intensity that should supercede his hostility toward her father and his exclusive way of life and toward the more subtle forms of exclusion that he encountered in California.

As the functional connection between Jackson’s past and his future, Catherine possesses in her own ability to feel deeply one truth about emotion as a possible key to the future and to change. She represents a means of taking Jackson’s past with him into an uncertain future that can possibly be made secure by the love and companionship of another person. Catherine, with her complex ties to Louisiana, the place and the people, is Jackson’s way of accepting the nostalgia and the substance of his Aunt Charlotte’s for what was a strong relationship between two individuals in the past. Catherine is a means of accepting, while ostensibly rejecting, the Louisiana that was formerly personified by Charlotte. When Jackson asks Catherine, “‘My life? . . . Are you my life?’” he is admitting, whether he knows it or not, that what he requires of her
is a solution to his need to know himself and his future. Although he no longer participates in the ceremonies and paradigmatic gestures of the traditional culture in his native Louisiana, and thus partake of the community in the quarters, he acknowledges in his love for Catherine the inability of the individual to make a life alone, to face the future alone, to endure the present alone, or to accept the past alone. As Gaines has pointed out in his interview with John O’Brien, “to break away from the past, from one philosophy to another, is a burden that one individual cannot endure alone.”

In transferring his emotional energy to Catherine, Jackson ignores the fact that she embodies many of the tensions of race that he wishes to escape. Catherine is part of the unchanging patterns developed out of a slave society and a cast-bound system. She may be the daughter of Della, a Creole woman who once communicated with blacks in the quarters and acknowledged her need for love and companionship and by extension recognized her place among blacks; nonetheless, Catherine is even more the daughter of Raoul, who so staunchly clings to his father’s world of colored Creoles and adamantly rejects assimilation into the black masses. While Catherine is figuratively and literally the intermediate generation, bridging the chasm between the old tradition and the as yet unformed new one, she also locks herself into a life of conformity to her father’s ways. She may not believe in stasis, but she accepts it as her personal fate. Unlike Kate Chopin’s women who are trapped by their external world, Catherine is trapped by her own feelings, values, and beliefs. She feels deeply both for her Louisiana kin and for her place in the Louisiana environment. Even while planning to leave the quarters with Jackson, she is overwhelmed by her emotions for what will be lost: “I . . . the trees go by, the houses go by, the cars, the fences, the river, Louisiana—my life.” Whereas Jackson envisions Catherine as his “life” and transforms her into his center of meaning, Catherine sees Louisiana as her “life.”

Because she is a metaphor for Louisiana, Catherine is incapable of severing her ties with the land or abandoning her debilitating relationship with her father. She cannot leave, because as Gaines has said, “she would die like a fish out of water. As long as there is one person left, she would want to be there.” In portraying Catherine as compassionate and self-sacrificing, as secure in her identity and proud of her heritage, yet as understanding humanity beyond the stratification of color, Gaines debunks the myth of the Creole woman of color, who has fascinated not only fiction writers, such as George Washington Cable, Grace King, or Frank Yerby in his first novel, but also most of the travelers who visited Louisiana and left written observations. For the most part, all of them recorded the beauty and the charms of these women who,
especially in the nineteenth century, held court at the legendary Quadroon balls and frequently entered into placage arrangements with wealthy white men. Gaines is obviously attracted to this particular Louisiana type in his attempt to capture the essence of the land, its past, and its present problems, as his portrait of Mary Agnes LeFabre and her grandmother in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* suggests. However, he demystifies Catherine and later Mary Agnes as well.

When Jackson Bradley looks at Catherine, he tells her: “‘You’re like the light. Your hair, your face, your smile, your body. You’re light. You’re life.’” He is not necessarily referring wholly to Catherine’s physical appearance; nevertheless, he includes, to an extent, her coloring in his tribute to the woman who might help him remove the darkness and the walls enclosing his life. Although he wishes to transform her into both the object of his physical desires and a concrete focus for his life, he is not allowed to do so, because Catherine herself refuses the old roles assigned to her type. She will not allow Jackson’s desires or her own to supercede her sense of obligation and duty, even though she is not an asexual being. Here Gaines flirts with the appeal of the light-skinned black woman that has been a stock ingredient in much melodramatic fiction about Louisiana; however, instead of pursuing obvious lines, he sets out a realistic portrait of color as a major factor in determining an individual’s identity, given the historical and social reality of American society, but color does not become the measure by which his individual is either valued or defined. Gaines makes Catherine a plain-living, hard-working woman, whose attractive feature is her character rather than her physical appearance.

Jackson does not understand what Catherine so clearly does: that one must understand one’s own place in the world and one’s relationship to others before being able to go forth into the larger world. This idea is similar to a statement that Gaines made to Ruth Laney: “My philosophy, in a way, is that you must stand individually in order to stand with the crowd.” Until Jackson becomes cognizant of what he is doing, why he makes the choices or transferences that he makes, he will be unable to validate effectively the meaning of his own life or to move towards his future.

Jackson’s replacement of the problems in his life with Catherine may or may not ultimately allow him to transcend the walls enclosing him; however, Della Carmier’s transformation of Jackson into her dark-skinned son Mark appears to be a replacement that can achieve a reinterpretation of the past and an amelioration of the present and potentially a synthesis for the future. By fusing the black prodigal son, Jackson, with Mark, the rejected Creole son, Della makes a metaphorical transformation which suggests both a possible solution to the novel’s
racial tensions and a tentative affirmation of life. Though weak and underdeveloped, the replacement of the dead Mark, who was Della’s “outside” child fathered by a black, with Jackson implies a resurrection and a beginning, because in the third pattern central to the novel, death is the major symbol.

This pattern, important to the metaphorical structure, juxtaposes beauty and death, usually in the descriptions of the natural landscape and its cultivated environs or man-made structures. The pattern of death and beauty stems from the spatial reality of the deteriorating Louisiana world and from the psychological impact of racial distinctions. Dominating the pattern is the Carmier house and its tree-filled yard, which from the opening section function to link the special beauty of the plantation setting with the deaths of Robert Carmier at the hands of the Cajuns and of Mark Carmier probably by Raoul’s hand. Robert’s death reiterates the racial antagonism in the fields and between Creoles, blacks, and Cajuns, while Mark’s emphasizes the racial conflicts in the quarters among blacks and Creoles. The Carmier house, then, “big, ugly, black behind the trees,” becomes obscured by death and darkness: “Regardless of how bright the sun was shining, the big trees in the yard always kept the yard and the house in semi-darkness.” “Gray Spanish moss hung from most of the trees. . . . The yard was covered with dead leaves.”

Jackson, despite Madame Bayonne’s initial warning (“‘nothing outside those trees is allowed in that yard. . . . Don’t go behind those trees, Jackson. It won’t come to any good.’”), perceives all of the quarters and his own emotions in terms of the Carmier house. When he looks “at the old cypress tree down the riverbank,” he sees only the “gray-black Spanish moss hung from every limb like long, ugly curtains.” When he walks through the quarters at night, he views it as like the Carmier house, “quiet, looking gray and ghostlike.” The funereal imagery, culminating in Jackson’s visit to the old cemetery, suggests the way in which natural beauty becomes death in the novel. In fact, the first part ends with Jackson’s reflections and questions: “How can anyone stay here? . . . Everything is drying up; everything is half-dead. Am I any better off? . . . I’m in the same class . . . dry, dead.” Jackson’s image of himself recalls the “dead leaves” covering the Carmier yard and the larger drying up and dying of the quarters and its residents.

Importantly too, the juxtaposing of beauty and death also extends the meaning of Raoul Carmier, who is said to be “killing himself working, trying to keep up with the Cajuns.” Raoul’s world, as his daughter Lillian observes, is dead, “over with,” because “today you’re one way or the other; you’re white or you’re black. There’s no in between.” Associated with the death of the Creoles of color as a distinct caste,
Raoul is a man whose "individual consciousness is achieved by strategic ignorance and suppression," which Marshall McLuhan has labeled as "man's right to his own ignorance" that might "be said to be his principal means of private identity." Although he may well recognize that his world is dying, Raoul maintains his private identity by denying that he is black and that his present condition has any connection to the racism prevalent in the plantation system. He ignores his connections to all but the Creole world and his rented parcel of land, and in the process he practically destroys his family. Yet, despite his flaws and twisted psychology, Raoul ironically is the character who holds out for life in the midst of death and destruction, who holds on to his status as a man in a system that would deprive him of manhood. He becomes one lesson for Jackson in the meaning of living and of manhood in spite of his major failings, because as Jackson reluctantly admits, there is "something about the man, different from all the others around here. . . . He was still trying to stand when all the odds were against him. That was it, that was the only thing." This characteristic of Raoul Carmier becomes the measure of the most memorable of Gaines's characters: Marcus in Of Love and Dust, Miss Jane Pittman and her Jimmy, and Rev. Phillip Martin in In My Father's House (1978).

In the final section of the novel, it is Raoul Carmier whom Jackson must engage in a life and death struggle, if he is to break out of his personal emptiness and overwhelming sense of death. His victory over Raoul is significant because it allows him to stand individually as a man with his own strong, personal convictions instead of being "dry, dead." Unlike Raoul, however, Jackson in his emotional connection to Catherine and his metaphorical link to Mark may have the opportunity to achieve a fuller life, one that would accomplish a synthesis between headlands and quarters, between the place at the end of a plowed furrow where Gaines's characters stand in isolation on the land where they work and exist, and the place where in the rows of dilapidated houses, they join others in experiencing social and communal relations. Gaines leaves that synthesis as a probability, yet he places only Jackson at one point, and Catherine at another, on one of the headlands, where Jackson stands viewing the destruction and the changes from the retrospect of his former life and in reflection about his future. Jackson stands in memory and in hope; his posture, ultimately, is why "this Louisiana thing" that, in an interview with Charles H. Rowell, Gaines has said "drives" him as an author is compelling to us as readers.