THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY IN TWO SHORT STORIES BY ERNEST J. GAINES

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The interaction between the community and the individual, along with its role in the shaping of human personality, is a primary concern of Ernest J. Gaines in much of his fiction. It is in probing the underlying community attitudes, values, and beliefs to discover the way in which they determine what an individual will or has become that Gaines gives poignancy to the pieces in his short-story collection Bloodline (1968; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1970). Because his fiction focuses on the peculiar plight of black Americans in the South, Gaines must consider an additional level of significance—the strong communal bonds characteristic of Southern black folk culture. In these stories, black folk culture, with its emphasis on community-defined values and behaviors, shows signs of deterioration, while Western individualism and the development of more personally-defined values appear as catalysts in the demise of the black folk world view. In such a cultural climate, the spiritual and emotional well-being of both the community and the individual is threatened. Faced with the necessity to act and finding traditional solutions no longer viable, the characters in Gaines' stories struggle desperately to restore some semblance of normalcy to their worlds. The dramatic conflict endemic to the stories in Bloodline arises out of the efforts of various characters to reconcile their individual needs with community prerequisites. Two of the stories in Bloodline, "A Long Day in November" and "The Sky Is Gray," are particularly illustrative of the conflict between community perspective and individual needs. The conflict in these two stories further illustrates the importance of the changes taking place within Southern black culture to the development of the social consciousness of children. While the action of the stories revolves around two young boys, the resolution of the conflict resides with their parents.

In "A Long Day in November," the friction in the story arises over a conflict between Amy's and Eddie's definition of manhood and male responsibility. At the outset of the story, Amy decides to abandon her marriage to Eddie and, with her young son, Sonny, returns home to her mother. Her dissatisfaction stems from her conviction that Eddie spends far too much time with his car and not enough time with his family. Eddie, however, is unable to understand Amy's objections. Although he is not very attentive to his family and household, he works to support them, a traditionally acceptable means of fulfilling his male responsibility. In this conflict of values, it becomes clear that Eddie's concept of the male's responsibility to his family is based on more traditional considerations than Amy's. While Eddie is comfortable with the traditional definition of the black male's familial role, he fails to realize that the circumstances which gave rise to it do not necessarily continue to exist for him. The inability of the black male to provide for and protect his family has traditionally forced him to find alternative means of demonstrating his manhood. Through his car, a traditional symbol of masculinity and male independence in American culture, Eddie attempts to define his manhood outside of his family. Amy, however, refuses to accept either Eddie's attachment to his car as a demonstration of his masculinity or his staying out until the early morning hours as a definition of his familial responsibility. By leaving him she forces him to seek a new way of conceptualizing his role as father and husband.

The action of the story is filtered through the consciousness of the couple's young son, Sonny. The use of Sonny as narrator suggests that this story is more than a simple narrative of male/female conflict. The centrality of the disagreement between Amy and Eddie to the development of Sonny's emerging social consciousness is implied from the very beginning of the story. From his being awakened in the early morning hours to face the "cold" realities of a new day until his return to those covers in the evening, Sonny is an initiate/observer in a long day's manhood ritual. Eddie, who, up to this point, has defined his manhood in terms of what he has perceived as community standards, suddenly discovers after Amy's departure that the old communal consensus on male behavior no longer exists. Consequently, the lessons learned from the day's events become as important, if not more so, for Sonny's father as they do for the boy. Through conversations with other male community members, both Eddie and Sonny discover that the traditional definitions of manhood and male responsibility have also proved inadequate for others. For Eddie, the changing perspectives on manhood mean a reevaluation of his conscious knowledge of the world, and for Sonny, they precipitate the development of a consciousness based on different preconceptions than those of his father's time.

Eddie's attempts to effect a reconciliation with Amy are, on the one hand, complicated by Amy's mother Rachael, whose traditional values threaten to sever the marriage permanently, and, on the other hand, by his own enslavement to a traditional world view. Rachael's traditionalism is exemplified in the story by the coloring of her speech and logic with folk platitude. For example, her objection to Eddie as a son-in-law is based on her superstitious belief that "a yellow nigger with a gap 'tween his front teeth ain't no good" (p. 14). And Amy's present problem with Eddie simply confirms Rachael's general assessment of his character, an assessment which she delights in delivering proverbially: "Put a fool in a car and he becomes a bigger fool" (p. 14). Her philosophy of "live and learn" (p. 16) eventually leads her to bring up Freddie Jackson, her own choice of a husband for Amy. Rachael considers Freddie a perfect mate in a traditional sense—he is hardworking and a landowner. Because she cannot envision a change in Eddie's behavior that would cause Amy to resume a marital relationship with him, Rachael does not feel any remorse concerning her attitude or actions toward Eddie. She feels perfectly justified in keeping Eddie away from Amy, even at the end of a gun.

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In some ways, Eddie's traditionalism is as much a hindrance to his discovering an answer to his marital problems as is Rachael's interference. His traditionalism is best exemplified in his approaches to finding a solution to his marital difficulties. He turns first to the minister and then to the conjure woman, two traditional sources of counsel and advice in the black community. However, through Eddie's interaction with the minister and the conjure woman, the transformations occurring within the culture are further highlighted. Of the two, the minister, as a representative of one of society's most conservative institutions, the church, envisions his role to be that of a translator of community values, not a proponent of change. His profession demands that he adhere to a common set of values for the entire community. Consequently, Eddie finds Reverend Simmons' advice of patience and prayer unacceptable because it does not speak specifically to his problem.

On the other hand, Eddie discovers that the conjure woman, Madame Toussaint, remains abreast of the individual needs of members of her community. Unlike the ministry, her profession lacks social respectability and official institutional affiliation; therefore, her economic survival depends on her staying in touch with the changing needs of her constituency and her ability to communicate effective solutions to individual situations. Her foreknowledge of Eddie's predicament is indicative of the way in which she has made the community's affairs her business. Even her methods of dealing with clients show signs of change: She does not offer the proverbial multifunctional trick which one traditionally associates with a conjurer. Madame Toussaint, instead, deals in advice designed to alleviate the underlying cause of situations faced by individuals who seek her out. Consequently, Eddie receives an effective and expedient solution to his marital difficulties from her. She goes to the source of the problem when she tells Eddie to burn his car. Although he considers her advice somewhat drastic at first, he eventually realizes that his situation demands a dramatic symbolic gesture of change.

The symbolic act of burning his car is performed in view of the entire community, illustrating the strong communal bonds still in existence. Because of Rachael's involvement in the dispute between Amy and Eddie and Eddie's own ineptness in handling his problem, the disagreement between the couple has become a community concern. Consequently, the ritual of burning his car to placate Amy no longer harbingers simply individual significance for Eddie but also acts to restore community equilibrium. Eddie must not only demonstrate his recognition of a need for change in his relationship with his family to Amy but also offer the community a symbol sufficient to atone for the chaos that he has brought to it. Even Rachael, who has maintained throughout the story that Eddie is incapable of change, is sufficiently moved by Eddie's action to exclaim: "I must be dreaming. He's a man after all!" (p. 57). And it has been Amy's goal all along to force Eddie to accept his manhood.

With the exception of Sonny, who is too young to have become fully indoctrinated with a reactionary communal world view, none of the characters in "A Long Day in November" is able to escape the tugs of traditionalism. Amy, who eventually forces Eddie to seek redefinition of his concept of manhood, appears to be the most individualistic. Her behavior, however, throughout the story indicates that she is as much a captive of traditional values as the others. Her refusal to accept Rachael's advice to leave Eddie and immediately move in with Freddie Jackson is expressed in terms of communal disapproval rather than personal conviction: "What would people say, out one house and in another one the same day?" (p. 25). Her concern for community perspective, however, is most poignantly demonstrated in her response to Eddie's having finally burned his car. She insists, despite his protests, that Eddie beat her to save himself from community scorn and ridicule.

Throughout "A Long Day in November," the sense of a unified folk community with a vested interest in its members looms in the background. Values and behaviors more indicative of an individualistic world view, however, also exist. They are evident in the conflict between Eddie and Amy over appropriate male behavior toward the family, and they are evident in the disagreement between Rachael and Amy on a generational level. Amy's refusal to condemn Eddie on the same grounds that her mother does, as well as her willingness to accept change in Eddie's character as a possibility, represents a move toward the acceptance of more personally-defined values. The recognition of individual needs is also salient in Eddie's search for a solution to his marital crisis. His failure to find Madame Toussaint's advice to the other men in the community applicable to himself is illustrative of the changes taking place. Ultimately, Sonny becomes a passive recipient of this cultural change. The story suggests that he, too, will be faced with the task of sorting out his own individual needs within a communal framework. He, however, will not only have the example of his parents but also the support of a concerned community.

The feeling of community which permeates "A Long Day in November"—that sense that whatever happens to Amy and Eddie is everybody's concern—is conspicuously absent from the second story in Bloodline, "The Sky Is Gray." James, the eight-year-old narrator of this story, struggles to understand his mother and her conceptions of manhood and dignity without aid from the community. With the exception of Auntie and Mr. Bayonne, who attempt to explain his mother's cold, dispassionate treatment of him on one occasion, James is alienated in his effort to come to grips with both the social and personal forces governing his life. The source of James' isolation is his mother Octavia, who moves through the world of the story with a calm and control which always seem on the verge of eruption. She has cut herself completely off from the community which conceivably could have provided her with support while her husband does his tour of duty in the army. Although her relationship with this absent husband is only briefly mentioned, one senses in her attitude and behavior that his departure left her vulnerable. As a result, she has made protecting James from becoming vulnerable her primary goal in life. The problem in the story arises not so much from her efforts to make James a "man" as from her approach to and definition of manhood.

In her efforts to make James a "man." Octavia apparently believes that she has only her own behavior and attitude toward life to offer as a model. To project an image of invulnerability for James, she alienates herself from the community and deals with her world on an individualistic level. The community, presumably, offers no such model.
Taking what she has—her pride and her poverty—, she moves toward her goal of inculcating in James a sense of independence and dignity in self undeterred by offers of kindness and generosity. However, because she never explains her motives to him, she presents James with a world filled with extremes which endangers his realization of the manhood she attempts to force prematurely on him. The “gray” of the sky which hangs threateningly over the action of the story symbolizes the dangers inherent in the extremes which James must reconcile. While “gray” literally represents the harmonious blending of black and white, its use in the story to describe the sky before a brewing storm symbolizes a potentially destructive force. The force implicit in the story is Octavia’s individualism, which threatens to deprive James of membership in the human community.

The dangers that her approach poses to James are dramatically illustrated in the argument between a minister and a student in the dentist’s office, the scene of much of the action. The argument between the men focuses on the existence of God. The minister accepts God unquestioningly, while the student rejects God because belief in Him alleviates the need to question:

“Show me one reason to believe in the existence of a God,” the boy says.
“My heart tells me,” the preacher says.
“‘My heart tells me,’” the boy says. “‘My heart tells me.’ Sure, ‘My heart tells me.’ 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.”

(pp. 77-78)

Whereas the minister clings to the traditional religious value of faith, the student espouses the development of more individualistic values based on reasoning and logic.

During the exchange between the men, the minister exposes the weakness of his position when he becomes frustrated and strikes the student. Through his action, he admits that the emotional or “heart” position leads to a cul de sac; it cannot be defended rationally. On the other hand, the student maintains a defensible position, but his egotistical stance exposes his feelings of alienation from his community. His father, we’re told, is dead, and his mother is in a charity ward with a serious illness. Furthermore, he is forced to “wash dishes at night” to finance his education. Consequently, his feelings of isolation cause him to alienate himself from the emotional support and comfort of the members of his community, whom he, in turn, deprives of the benefits of his education. His feelings of isolation are clearly illustrated in his conversation with a woman who attempts to take his side in the disagreement. Rather than explaining his position to her in such a way that she will be able to understand it, he raises his argument to a metaphysical level and alienates her:

“You really don’t believe in God?” the lady says.
“No,” he says.
“But why?” the lady says.
“Because the wind is pink,” he says.
“What?” the lady says.

The boy don’t answer her no more. He just reads in his book.

(p. 80)

Although he claims to have a solution for the black community, he refuses to consider its level of comprehen-

sion. Consequently, in attempting to communicate with the community, he feels frustration, which reinforces his belief in his own isolation.

Octavia’s skepticism and self-imposed isolation place her in a similarly antagonistic stance toward the community. Although her primary goal is to project a model of strength for James through her own actions, her inability to make her sense of the world comprehensible to him leaves James vulnerable to the very forces from which she would shield him. By forcing James to sublimate his emotions and accept them as signs of human weakness, she fails to provide him with a means of dealing with the emotional responses of others in a way consistent with her philosophy. James’ vulnerability to this aspect of human nature is illustrated in the episode with an old couple who offer them food during their visit to town. James does not betray the kind and heartfelt offer of the couple although his mother would want him to. He responds to the emotional intent of the act. It is through these kinds of moderating forces in James’ environment that Gaines sees his salvation.

Although Octavia does not operate from the same level of awareness that the student does, it is strongly implied that her attitude stems from perceptions and conscious choices made as a result of her husband’s army duty. She uses her new awareness to structure her world into clear-cut oppositional units. Her final statement to James in the story is probably the most illustrative of her world view: “‘You not a bum,’ she says. ‘You a man’” (p. 94). While this is the nature of Octavia’s world, it does not completely define the contours of the world with which James must come to terms. Human existence does not lend itself to such neat categorizing. Contrary to what Octavia would have him believe, the choices that James must eventually make about the quality of his existence should not be between “bum” and “man,” or between adhering to the dictates of the “head” or “heart” as advocated by the student and the minister respectively. His choices should involve a conscious effort to integrate the extremes. However, for the moment, James is literally and figuratively caught in the middle of a storm in which both social and personal forces threaten his well-being.

The symbolic significance of the “gray sky” is the key to an understanding of the complexity of the issue raised in the story. To see “gray” merely as the integration of black and white on a literal level, and as a metaphor for racial integration on a symbolic level is, I think, to misunderstand Gaines’ real intent in the story. As the argument between the student and minister in the dentist’s office clearly illustrates, there is a racial dimension present in the story. But the conflict goes much deeper than that. It also involves the problem of integrating the individual and the community in a mutually rewarding relationship in the face of dehumanizing individualistic forces. In this case, consciousness raising of blacks should not lead to an alienation from the community as it has for the student and Octavia; it should provide the basis for bettering the community.

In both “A Long Day in November” and “The Sky Is Gray,” Gaines involves the reader in the dilemma faced by individuals who find traditional folk values inadequate to meet their needs. In both cases, the situation is presented as a
puzzle to the young who must attempt to resolve the conflicts that come about as a result of this realization. For Eddie in "A Long Day in November," the ability to solve the enigma created by Amy's decision to leave him is compounded by his already established communal world view. However, his indirect discovery that the community is no longer capable of defining his individual responsibility to his family is potentially important both for him and for Sonny. Furthermore, the story implies that the community can continue to provide the individual with emotional support in his efforts to fulfill his individual needs. On the other hand, James in "The Sky Is Gray" will never know the values of communal bonds if Octavia has her way. Although the point is never explicitly stated, it is apparent that Octavia finds the values of her community inadequate to make James the kind of man that she feels he must become. Her personal situation can be seen as a metaphor for the plight of blacks. Dependency on the philanthropy and good will of others leads to vulnerability when that support is no longer forthcoming. Her alternative, however, creates an atmosphere which, for James, is potentially equal in the dangers it poses. The fact that neither story offers a resolution to the underlying conflict apparent in the situations is indicative of the contemporary nature of the issue which Gaines raises.

A YEA AND AN ANNOUNCEMENT:
NOTICE OF A NEW
BLACK PLAYWRIGHT AND HIS WORK

HOUSTON A. BAKER, JR.*

[they] yield me hot trust, their yea and their announcement that they are ready to rile the high-flung ground.
—Gwen Brooks

There are at least two ways to experience genius. One consists of season's tickets, outrageous downtown parking fees, and carefully-cultivated responses to a fastidiously-unvarying repertoire of Western art. A second consists of randomly-selected events tumbled upon by accident on the one Sunday in which there is enough time left from priorities to read the entertainment section of the newspaper. And then there is dumb luck. It was the third way that brought together Memorial Day and Louis Gossett, Jr., in an imprinting manner, causing me to set aside two hours on 31 May 1982 to watch ABC Theatre-Of-The-Month's production of Benny's Place, a drama based on a magnificent script written by Philadelphia playwright J. Rufus Caleb. Caleb's original script was entitled Benny/Benny's Place and won top honors at the Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference in 1981.1

The plot of Benny's Place (the title which I will use as a conflation of Caleb/ABC) is relatively simple: An aging black man, whose retirement is within view, suddenly finds himself locked in physical and psychological combat with those boogies that eternally beset lives carved out as tentative arrangements, lives in which the only certainty might well be one's bodily strength. The play opens with Benny contesting all comers in a black neighborhood bar where he is clearly known and respected as the champion of a game in which participants stand back-to-back and attempt to move each other out of the main plane of force. The one who breaks the plane—by being pushed—is the loser. Benny is the hands-down winner, and the state in which we meet him alerts us to the fact that he has claimed the lion's share of the winner's spoils in the form of alcohol. Leaving the bar Benny is inebriated—confused and bleary-eyed. Neighborhood roughs—no more than teenagers—take advantage of his instability, robbing him of his wallet and leaving him injured and barely conscious in the gutter. His salvation for the evening comes in the person of Odessa (played by the formidable Cicely Tyson), a black woman close to Benny's age whose house casts light from its windows on the deserted street. Even as she ministers to him—against the judgment and stern rebukes of her nephew Ricky T.—we realize that Benny and Odessa are drawn to each other by feelings and understandings, instincts for complementarity, that will lead to captivating interactions. Ricky T. recognizes this as well, and as heir apparent to Odessa's house and such other fortune as she possesses, he is far more than cautious of Benny. He wants him out of the house and out of the lives of its inhabitants. Again, the tension of youth and age—as in the mismatch between Benny and the street toughs—makes an appearance.

We see "Benny's Place" for the first time on the morning after. His "place" (with all the lusty and devastating connotations of "know your place," or "the Negro's place," or, more philosophically, "Man's Place") is a small wire cage

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