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“YOU NOT A BUM, YOU A MAN”:
ERNEST J. GAINES’S BLOODLINE

by Hubert Shuptrine

Born on a Louisiana plantation in 1933, Ernest J. Gaines lives now in San Francisco but returns to his boyhood home yearly. He has turned the materials of his own life and the history and folklore of the changing Louisiana plantation system into three novels — Catherine Carmier (1964); Of Love and Dust (1967); and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971). The last is now a major film, televised on CBS in January of 1974. With his short story cycle Bloodline (Dial Press: New York, 1968), these books form one of the most interesting starts toward creating a postage stamp of a mythical Southern community since Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha. Though he lives in California, he said in late 1972 that he intends to keep writing about Louisiana “Till I get it all out of me. I hope I never do. I don’t think there’s anything more important” (New Orleans Review, No. 4, 1973).

The five stories of Bloodline progress like an episodic novel, unified by a common setting and theme: the quest for manhood and dignity in a racist Louisiana plantation system. Though the characters do not move from one story into another, as they do in Faulkner’s The Unvanquished, for instance, the pattern of arrangement, the common themes, and the similar characters build a powerful drama of people trapped in that curious and awful dilemma, their bloodline.

A dual time scheme patterns the story cycle. The first tale, “A Long Day in November,” begins with a little boy waking in early morning darkness; and the last story, “Just Like a Tree,” completes the cycle as an old woman dies in the darkness after midnight.

“A Long Day in November” starts in the wee hours of the morning, a pun that sets the mood of this disarming innocent tale of simple life on the old plantation. Mama wakes Sonny so he can go “wee-wee,” and he resists, not wanting to leave the warm covers and go out into the cold. Sonny is a child, not yet called on to face his manhood; he likes to “pull the cover ‘way over” his head. He feels “good ‘way under there,” and in the security of home he thinks, “I’m sure glad I ain’t a pig. They ain’t got no mama and no daddy and no house” (p. 7).

But although Sonny hardly senses the threat, his security is in jeopardy. For on this day Mama has resolved to leave her husband, who gives his new car more attention than her. The story’s comic triangle poses the question, “How will Daddy show Mama that he loves her more than he does his car?” Like Sonny, Mama needs the security of love. And so does Daddy, though Mama snaps, “‘Get love from what you give love. You love your car. Go let it love you back’” (p. 11).

When Daddy tries to bring her back, his mother-in-law shoots at him. When the preacher can’t help him, he resorts to “the old hoo-doo woman,” Madame Toussaint. Her advice is the step toward manhood which Gaines, like Faulkner, consistently demands: sacrifice and love. “Burn that car,” Madame Toussaint
tells him. Only then, she insists, will his wife return. At first, such total sacrifice is beyond him; even when Mama agrees to come back to him on that condition, he begs her to let him sell the car, since three hundred dollars is a fortune to him, a plantation laborer. When she refuses, he finally does burn it to prove his love. Seeing his sacrifice, even his hostile mother-in-law exclaims, "I must be dreaming. He's a man after all!" (p. 57). And at the end of the long day in November, relatively untouched by the near-tragedy, the child Sonny lies down again in the comfort and security of his bed, listening without awareness to the springs on his parents' bed, and he thinks under the covers, "It's warm. I feel good 'way under here'" (p. 63).

Sonny needs the security of home, and in this story of love and humor, he has it. Except through implication, Gaines says nothing about the poverty, the suppression, the dilemma of people trapped in a plantation system only a step out of slavery. Only after reading the other stories can we see how clearly the theme is there in the story of a man so stunned by the system that the first car he can afford becomes an obsession which almost destroys him as a man, and which would have deprived his son of the warmth and love he needs in childhood (compare the stunting of Joe Christmas at age five, deprived of love, in Light in August). Though Daddy does not consciously regard his sacrifice as an act of manhood, his mother-in-law and Gaines obviously do. And in the other stories, manhood is an even more conscious goal.

In "The Sky Is Gray," for instance, the boy James is only slightly older than Sonny, but wiser, more painfully aware of the cold of insecurity. For his father is gone, and the wife, son, and other children are left behind on the plantation in poverty. When James develops a toothache and must be taken into Bayonne to the dentist, he and his Mama have only enough money for the dentist, a little salt pork, and the bus ride back home. But in the long cold day, Mama spends half their grocery money for cake and milk for James. Learning to sacrifice, James denies being hungry so that his Mama will eat some. Later, when an elderly lady invites them into her house to eat, Mama insists they will work for their dinner, and James moves the woman's empty trash cans for her. In dignity, having learned a lesson in sacrifice and self-reliance, James hears his Mama tell him, as icy water runs down the back of his neck, "'Turn your collar down. You not a bum. You a man.'"

The young man of the next story, "Three Men," learns endurance through more violent experiences. After cutting another Black man, called Bayou, over a woman, Proctor Lewis turns himself in at the white man's jail. The brutal policeman, T. J., intimidates Proctor, but not enough to break his spirit. For he counts on the rich white plantation owner, Roger Medlow, to bond him out of jail again, a common practice then, in the plantation system. The hero of Gaines's novel Of Love and Dust, for example, is bonded out after exactly the same act of violence.

The catch, as Proctor learns from Munford, an older killer in his cell, is that once a Black man allows himself to be bonded out, he forfeits his manhood and becomes nothing but a beast, trapped in a cycle of debasement of outrage and violence which the landlords gladly sponsor. Munford offers himself as proof: he began exactly like young Proctor, and he is now nothing more than a plantation joke, a drunkard the whites indulge, since he is no threat to their own manhood.

Midway between boyhood and manhood, Proctor longs for the comfort of his mother, who was strong like James's mother in "The Sky Is Gray." But she is dead, now, and he must find his way alone. Solace is offered him, though, by Hattie, a homosexual in the cell who wants to smother him with maudlin and perverted comfort. Instinctively, Proctor rejects Hattie, and the killer Munford warns that such weakness as Hattie represents is the other alternative to manhood.

Munford therefore urges Proctor to reject Roger Medlow's bond and go to prison, there to "'sweat out all the crud you got in your system. Go, saying, 'I want to be a man, and by God I will be a man. For once in my life I will be a man.'"" (p. 112). Proctor knows that if he refuses the bond, life in prison will be hell. Etheridge Knight has a poem, "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Crazily Insane," in which the prisoners' defiant hero is broken by the system, lobotomized, like McMurphy in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Proctor himself knows a man named Jack who was broken "'down to nothing—to a grinning, bowing fool,'" because he dared behave like a man.

It is all right for the little boy of the first story to "'pull covers' in the security of his parents' home, but Proctor cannot; his time of decision has come. "'I didn't want to have to pull covers over my head every time a white man did something to a black boy—I wanted to stand.'" But he finds he is not entirely alone. A boy even younger is thrown into the cell, and Proctor saves him from the soft unmanly comfort of Hattie the homosexual. Impulsively, Proctor tells the boy to pray for him. "'That's the only way I'll be able to take those beatings—with you praying.'" This feeling of brotherhood replaces the lost comfort of family security. The Joads, we recall, turned to similar brotherhood, in The Grapes of Wrath. The story, however, ends unresolved, with Proctor waiting for his ordeal to begin and hoping that he will be able to endure.

In the next story, "Bloodline," a man several years older than Proctor returns to the plantation, obviously having endured his own prison term. Hardened, stronger than ten men, though driven nearly mad, Copper Laurent returns to claim his birthright. For Copper is the proud son of a Black woman and of Walter Laurent, a haughty white man now dead (like old Carothers McCaslin). Walter's invalid brother Frank, maintaining the old order, demands that Copper enter the big house through the back door; Copper, though, insists that he will enter only through the front door, as is his right. But Copper has seen too much injustice and has become insanely obsessed. J. W., one of the workers sent to force Copper to enter through the back, reports after he and five others have been beaten by Copper: "'That boy crazy. No concern for human beings at all. They don't mean no more to him than a dog or a snake.'" Indeed, Copper seems excessive in
his drive toward social justice. But beneath his cold poise, there is a human in torment, possibly with the guilt of his brutal father. “You could see in Copper’s face how his mind went and came back,” the narrator says. The left side of his face trembles, and later in the scene, talking about the millions “without homes, without birthrights, just like me,” Copper raises both hands and presses them hard against his face, crying, “The suffering, the suffering, the suffering” (p. 169).

What was a feeling of love in Proctor Lewis has become in Copper a fanatical obligation to liberate others. Leaving the plantation to raise a liberation army, Copper vows: “We’ll be back, Uncle. And I’ll take my share. I won’t beg for it, I won’t ask for it; I’ll take it. I’ll take it or I’ll bathe this whole plantation in blood.” Speaking last year of Copper, Gaines said, “He’s on the verge of madness. And he will not free people, but somebody else might do it” (New Orleans Review, No. 4, 1973).

In the last story, “Just Like a Tree,” a young man named Emmanuel carries the cause “a little bit further.” He also has hated and has yearned to kill. But Aunt Fe, as compassionate as Faulkner’s Dilsey, convinces him to get killing out of his mind, and he becomes a leader of a resistance movement. But when a bombing kills a woman and her two children, Aunt Fe’s niece decides to move her to safety in the North. As leader of the movement, Emmanuel regrets that Aunt Fe must leave, but explains that he cannot quit. “If they were to bomb my own mother’s house tomorrow, I would still go on.”

Loved by all on the plantation, Aunt Fe has earned her own “selfhood,” her estate of happiness, and she would rather die than be separated from it. Though merely the plantation, this place is her home. Here she has lived, and here she determines to die, like Grandpa Joao in The Grapes of Wrath. Leola tries to explain to the young niece how important home is to Aunt Fe: “Louise, moving her from here’s like moving a tree you been used to in your front yard all your life” (p. 182). In the night, therefore—not in defeat, but as an act of completion—Aunt Fe declares, “I feel like singing my ‘termination song,’” and she dies.

To Aunt Fe, it is better to sacrifice anything than be deprived of one’s dignity or selfhood. The father in the first story learns to sacrifice his car in order to claim his wife’s love and his own manhood. Little James and his Mama in the second story earn dignity in spite of poverty and humiliation. Proctor Lewis in “Three Men” determines to stand and become a man, or die. Though mad, Copper demands dignity for himself and all others. And like the old spiritual that precedes the last story, Aunt Fe will not let herself be moved: Just like a tree that’s planted ‘side the water.

Oh, I shall not be moved.

Manhood, then, Gaines’s stories show (and the theme runs through his novels, as well), is worth sacrificing anything for, since it is finally the goal of deepest value, the only thing that cannot be taken away. In “A Long Day in November,” the boy’s Daddy has said, “A man can’t live by himself in this world. It too cold and cruel.” But since families do become separated, comfort, in times of stress, can sometimes be found only in the social goal, the common need, the dream of the last story’s leader, Emmanuel.

Emmanuel is actively, sacrificially trying to change the system (although Gaines, in the 1973 New Orleans Review interview, maintained that Emmanuel does not succeed, either, but only tries). At least he is seeking his manhood and the salvation of his people in what seems to him the only compassionate way on the plantation at that time. And Aunt Fe, on the night of her death—in part, at least, because of his quest—gives him her blessing; “Good-bye, Emmanuel,” she say. She look at him a long time. ‘God be with you’” (p. 197). She could just as well have told him what James’s mother said in “The Sky Is Gray”—that compliment and commendation, even blessing, which all of these stories imply is the highest praise one can wish for: “You not a bum. You a man.”

Walter R. McDonald
Columbia College
Columbia, South Carolina

MELVILLE AND BROTHERHOOD
Herman Melville’s fiction and his multi-racial characters reflect a deep commitment to the ideal of the brotherhood of men. Edward S. Grejda provides the first full-length exploration of this reflection in The Common Continent of Men: Racial Equality in the Writings of Herman Melville.

Melville’s views, as disclosed by Professor Grejda in this searching analysis of each of his works from Typee to Billy Budd, were remarkably avant garde and bear astonishing contemporary relevance. The study serves as a reminder of how far we have yet to go to erase the fear, distrust and hatred between races—before we can realize that dream of meeting on “the common continent of men.”

OTHER’S EXPECTATIONS

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Ronald Davis