Que(e)rying the Prison-House of Black Male Desire: Homosociality in Ernest Gaines’s “Three Men”

Interviewer: [Critics] say Miss Jane Pittman is the greatest Black female character since Dilsey.
Gaines: (Laughter): Oh, yeah, Dilsey.
Interviewer: Dilsey is nowhere compared to Miss Jane. You are much better at your Black people than Faulkner.
Gaines: Well, I hope I am. I hope I am. —John Lowe (132)

Gaines shares with Faulkner, as well, a valuing of the old ways, even a basic conservatism in matters other than racial change. —Fred Hobson (96)

A member of the pantheon of African American southern writers, Ernest Gaines hails from a region with such a fertile artistic tradition that one would assume that his subject matter would be inherited as his birthright. Southern literature critic Fred Hobson elevates him to the Olympus of southern literary arts and letters, beside such exalted figures as Faulkner and the New Critics: “For it is Gaines more than any other black Southerner who realizes in his fiction most of those qualities I have mentioned that were long assumed to be the domain of the white southern writer. Indeed, it is not overstating the case to contend that Gaines, in most respects, admirably fulfills [Donald] Davidson’s autochthonous [native] ideal” (94). By aesthetic fiat, Gaines has chronicled the life-scapes of a peculiar landscape that has countenanced peculiar institutions and queer things. Following the injunction of the patriarch of southern/American literary art, Gaines has unstintingly showcased the people and places that make up his Louisiana postage stamp. As with any southern writer worth his or her soil, Gaines showcases the grand southern themes: race, place, gender, honor, pride. His fiction reflects an abiding artistic concern: the evolution of black male subjects in a region historically committed to their devitalization if not outright annihilation. With the specter of Emmett Till and James Byrd lingering in the American and southern black consciousness, Ernest Gaines has almost obsessively made black male subjectivity within this inhospitable territory his artistic raison d’etre, one aim being to show that black male personhood and US southern culture are not inconsonant.

Gaines’s dogged attempt to intervene upon the archetypal narrative of black southern male evisceration with his own revitalized portraiture is laudable but ultimately knotty. While many critics agree that “In his fiction, Ernest Gaines is interested not only in deconstructing stereotypes but also in presenting new models of southern manhood, for both black and white men” (Jones 30), I contend that his seemingly reconfigured male sub-
jects retain the hallmarks of an atavistic masculine construction. Gaines’s 1968 story “Three Men” is an ineluctably southern tale of black male sound and fury in which the author re-maps the protocols of black male desire while paradoxically championing some of the more odious dimensions of what Kaja Silverman has labeled the “dominant fiction of masculinity” (42), a narrative of unencumbered and unningar phallocentrism, privilege, and power.

As he does in many of his narratives, Gaines situates black men in relation to each other, subverting standard discursive formations of black male subjects. To this end, he employs the trope of the prison, which ostensibly permits him to explore de rigueur issues related to male identity — violence, racism, sexual aggression. More importantly, however, his tropic prison animates explorations of what might be considered the interstices of black male identity. For instance, by fictivizing same gender intimacy as part of a constellation of issues related to identity formation, Gaines writes against a “queer” orthodoxy that too often privileges sex as the sine qua non of male connectivity, often with the attendant elision of issues related to racialized or gendered components of identity. In effect, Gaines cannily disrupts a univocal narrative of same-sex desire, showing, for instance, that desire can involve male rituals such as storytelling and story-listening. Such revivifying depictions yield more nuanced black male subjects, alternatives to the monochromatic Bigger Thomas and other such long-suffering literary male victims.

Ultimately, however, “Three Men” is at best a rhetorical conundrum, a dialectical narrative that undermines its own attempts to witness against delineating notions of black male subjectivity. Coyly but frustratingly, while Gaines’s story contests a patriarchal narrative of unbridled masculine ideality, the story self-deconstructively upholds this very jaundiced configuration of male identity through its blatant homophobia and a twin scourge, sexism. Given the story’s virtually antipodal narrative impulses, I conclude that the text simultaneously expands the parameters of black male desire both psychosocially and sexually, while it reifies execrable dimensions of legitimized masculine praxis: most notably, its sanctioning of anti-gay violence as a marker of a culturally enshrined masculine ethos. The resulting narrative ambiguity evidences what I deem the limitations of Gaines’s homosociality, where male intimacy is tenuous and circumscribed by the dictates of black masculinist orthodoxy.

Set in Louisiana in the 1940s, the story’s eponymous “three men” are Procter Lewis, the 19-year-old narrator; Munford Bazille, an incorrigible 60-year-old criminal; and Hattie Brown, whose age is not given but whose stereotypically feminine name serves as a guidepost for his position on the prison’s masculine totem pole. The story opens with Procter turning himself in for murdering another black man in a barroom fight over a woman. Procter’s decision to surrender discomfits the white prison officials, who are not accustomed to black men acting responsibly. He is then incarcerated with the two older prisoners, and the story unfolds as a series of encounters between the three with occasional flashbacks that help elucidate Procter’s current predicament. As in many rites-of-passage narratives, the older men provide moral and philosophical guidance for Procter, a thug-in-training whom Munford mentors and reforms through a series of personal confessions and cautionary tales. By the story’s conclusion, Procter has clearly inculcated some of Munford’s beliefs. The elder prisoner’s didactic mission is to impart to Procter how black men’s habitual criminality and white men’s persistent “rescuing” of them is part of a systemic bestializing that denies them agency and selfhood—a vicious
cycle of sociopathic black behavior that not only is self-denigrating, but also self-aggrandizing for whites, whose own collective identity is concretized in designating black men as feral and other. Given this lesson, the story ends with Procter choosing to go to the state penitentiary instead of permitting the white owner (Roger Medlow) of the plantation on which he lives and works to extricate him, thereby disrupting the cyclical dehumanization that Munford has so ardently denounced. Ostensibly, as critics such as Robert Luscher have surmised, “Three Men” is the most “positive” story in the collection *Bloodline*, since “Procter, in discovering the route to authentic manhood—not exaggerated machismo—recovers a portion of his humanity as well as a measure of control over his own life” (76). But underneath the patina of Luscher’s veneration of masculine ideality—“authentic manhood”—and equivocation—“measure of control”—lie the story’s governing rhetoric of patriarchal black masculinity founded on heterocentrism and an attendant blight, homophobia.

Given the accurateness of Robert Reid-Pharr’s claim that “the prison acts as a primary site for the articulation of a late twentieth-century Black American masculinity” (613), one can understand why this site permeates African American men’s literary discourse. To be sure, Gaines’s tropological use of it has literary resonance as well: authors as diverse as Chester Himes, Etheridge Knight, John Edgar Wideman, and August Wilson have deployed prison as a vehicle to interrogate issues related to sexuality, gender, class, and race.1 In the black social and literary imagination, the penal system emblematises an orchestrated, genocidal assault on black male personhood. Metonymically, it is at once a state-sponsored warehousing of black male bodies that lines the pockets of countless corporate interests in what has become widely known as the “prison industrial complex”; it is also state-sponsored commodification of black bodies, a modern-day reincarnation of a slaveocracy that exploits a black labor pool without monetary remuneration. As well, it is a site where the state, under the imprimatur of law, can convict the innocent, mete out disproportionate sentences (crack versus powder cocaine), and even render life and/or death sentences for those whose guilt is at best tenuous (for example, “cop killer” Mumia Abu-Jamal in Pennsylvania, “child murderer” Wayne Williams in Atlanta).

On one level, Gaines attempts to re-envision the trope of the prison in male literary discourse as a site of entrenched phallocentric and hypermasculine gender praxes, instead refiguring it as a space where intragender relationships can begin to germinate, if not fully flower. This use of the prison reflects what critic Robert Vorlicky has said about male playwrights’ use of all-male spaces of confinement to explore same-gender relationships: “Far from thwarting men’s aspirations, institutional settings afford the characters a kind of freedom usually denied them elsewhere” (5-6). Just as prison impelled the transformation of myopic, small-time hood Malcolm Little into a spiritually and communally conscious Malcolm X, the Gainesian prison inaugurates bonding and self-awareness, becoming a crucible-like space where men can begin to reevaluate and repair their deformed and miniaturized constructions of masculine identity. Gaines’s use of the *southern* prison as his fictive *mise-en-scène* magnifies the aforementioned pejorative cultural narrative. Be it Parchman Farm in Mississippi or Angola in Gaines’s native Louisiana, the southern prison evokes images of the concentration camp. As Houston Baker adduces in his study on Booker T. Washington, “we scarcely ever reflect that Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma—all southern territories of the actual present—are sites of mass black-and brown-
body incarceration . . . and extermination” (94). Indeed, the South, the historic epicenter of African American male (and female) dehumanization emblematized in its vile Jim Crow statutes, becomes the geographic analog to the literal prison. Gaines subsequently deploys the jail as a trope for male identity (re)formation and homosociality in what some consider his crowning artistic achievement, A Lesson Before Dying (1993). Given the ignominious history of prisons generally and southern prisons especially, Gaines’s fictive project has been the intervention and contestation of these historical and popular narratives: he has unswervingly attacked the idea that prison automatically represents an apparatus for surveillance, bondage, and disembodiment by (re)inscribing it as space where phallocentric notions of desire and subjectivity can be dislodged if not expunged, and where desire can take an array of forms. Nevertheless, though his characters unlearn much of their racialized mis-education, Gaines’s interpellations of black male sexual subjectivity trouble the narrative of “Three Men.” While the author clearly delineates the boundaries of homo- and hetero-identity, the story paradoxically obscures and even obliterates these very categories. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s comments on the fluidity or slipperiness of the homosexual and the homosocial for women inform my reading, as does her discussion of how this same “slippage” is comparably problematic for men. In theorizing the homosocial, Sedgwick posits that “it is applied to such activities as ‘male bonding,’ which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality. To draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbroken-ness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted” (1-2).

In Gaines’s rhetorical grammar, gayness supplants Africanist as the marker for what is an undefined, sacrosanct black masculinity—a compensatory hypermasculinity cultivated by scores of black men in response to real and perceived psychosexual castration.

for reconceptualizing black male sub-jectivity. However, he also repudiates the homosexual in order to preserve the sanctity of de-sexualized homosocial—and heterocentric—desire. Given this narrative paradox, I explore what can be deemed the text’s self-decon-struction, for it upholds the homosocial-homosexual nexus when it ostensibly appears to valorize its very discordance.

The character Munford, a career criminal who helps inaugurate Procter’s reformation, reflects the narrative’s seeming abjuration of a phal-lo-centric and patriarchal ethos. For instance, his impassioned declaration that “fucking don’t make him [a man] and fighting don’t make him—neither killing. None of this prove you a man. ‘Cause animals can fuck, can kill, can fight—you know that?” (138), provides a compelling counternarrative to the corrosive and self-abnegating constructions of hypersexuality and combative-ness that routinely emblematize black masculine subjectivity. Moreover, Gaines expands the parameters of
same-sex desire by showcasing storytelling and story-listening as core components of male intimacy. Presaging his own polyphonic tour de force, the 1983 novel A Gathering of Old Men, Gaines recasts intra-gender desire as a verbal trope in which one character stimulates the resuscitation of another’s voice. So when Munford entreats Procter to divulge the incident for which he is jailed—“Best to talk ‘bout it” (136)—Gaines punctuates the need for black men to share their stories within a milieu of men bound by a common socio-racial history. The conjoining of spatial ownership and verbal subjectivity makes Gaines’s prison the male counterpart of Virginia Woolf’s metaphorical “room of one’s own,” a psychically empowering site of gynocentric self-expression. The prisoners’ self-authenticating ritual of story-sharing, as much as anything else, recasts male desire by foregrounding the curative potential of the speech community in the re-envisioning of black male subjectivity.

But, ultimately, the view that “Clearly, Munford rejects masculinity of dominant culture” (Mallon 53) is immensely contestable. While the narrative admirably challenges the standard primitivizing of black men through its homosocial speech rituals, Gaines dilutes their potency by yoking them to male-sanctioned forms of sexism and more blatantly venomous displays of homophobia. The gay prisoner Hattie becomes the repository for both, as Munford’s maledictions commence with stereotypical designations of the “femme” gay man as female. During his opening encounter with Procter, Munford introduces Hattie by exclaiming, “Hattie is a woman” (127): here, Munford conflates homosexual, effeminate, and woman as lexical markers for deformed, polluted manhood. To crystallize his own nascent phallocentric voice, Procter will parrot Munford’s anti-woman/anti-gay rhetoric, subsequently describing Hattie as “the freak” and “a sad woman” (133). This twinning of gynophobia and homophobia pervades men’s apothecizing of an unencumbered masculine ideal: “For in the dark fantasies of the homophobic imagination, homosexuals are believed to enact a hideous parody of American womanhood; their presumed effeminacy challenges domestic femininity as well as staunch masculinity, and betrays both” (Fone 395).

While deplorable, the toxic discourse that Munford and his protégé spew eventually gives way to a more pernicious though recognizable form of hypermasculine cultural conduct: anti-gay violence. As Gaines’s moral compass, Munford lamentably insists on promulgating a view of homosexuality as a contamination of the ostensibly enlightened version of manhood that Munford previously uttered—that “fucking and fighting” do not inhere masculinity. Conjecturing the “causes” of Hattie’s homosexuality, Munford postulates that “It start in the cradle when they send that preacher there to christen you. At the same time he’s doing that mumbo-jumbo stuff, he’s low’ing his mouth to your little nipper to suck out your manhood. . . . This preacher going, ‘Mumbo-jumbo, mumbo-jumbo,’ but all the time he’s low’ing his mouth toward my little private” (140). Again, we see that the character’s anti-gay exegesis dovetails with beliefs specific to both 1960’s black masculinist Nationalism and to historically venomous views of homosexuality as predatory and pathological.

Recall the testosterone-sodden wing of the Civil Rights Movement, true men such as Eldridge Cleaver and Stokley Carmichael, who deemed the Christian-honed principles of “non-violence” heralded by Martin Luther King, Jr., as at least ineffective and at worst anti-masculine. I am reminded of Phillip Brian Harper’s trenchant discussion of the distorted masculine ontology that undergirded much 1960’s Black Nationalist rhetoric, evinced through diatribes by Amiri Baraka, Cleaver, and others, inventive
based on a facile binary of hyper-masculine black manhood and a milquetoast, white "homosexual" defilement of manhood. According to Harper, "This logic allowed for Black Arts judgments of insufficient racial identification to be figured specifically in terms of a failed manhood for which homosexuality, as always, was the primary signifier" (50). Accompanying this calumny is Munford's equally deleterious equation of pedophilia with homosexuality, a different type of "slippage" that bars homosexuals from serving as Scout Masters, though countless studies have shown that most child molesters are overwhelmingly heterosexual. Munford's incongruous and reductive collage of complex issues related to gender and sexual identity formation echoes the author's own race/gender taxonomies, which shed more light on the narrative's unstable gender politics.

Gaines's own summation of Hattie underscores how the character fits into the author's equivocal querying of black masculine desire. In an interview in which he expatiates on the socio-racial challenges black men face, Gaines asserts unabashedly:

You have the others who say the hell with it all, I'll never have a chance. And then you have the others who say I'm a defeatist. Now that's what "Three Men" is all about. You have the defeatist . . . like Hattie—the effeminate, the homosexual type thing, you know, just given up: I'll be whatever the world wants me to be. I will not try to be a man. Munford has gone just the opposite way: if anything gets in my way, I'm going to knock it over with a gun, or with an axe, or with anything. (Gauleit and Wootton 52)

Gaines's positioning of Hattie within the dominant discourse of 1960's authentic black manhood raises a vexing issue. On the one hand, his appraisal evinces a sexual disfigurement that valorizes Sheila Smith McKoy's observation that "Rather than opening a space for black gay subjectivity through his portraits of gay men, Gaines uses them to comment on the lessons in life and morality that his heterosexual protagonists learn as they define what it means to be black men" (24). On its face, then, Gaines's appraisal becomes an authorial counter-sign for the totemic masculinity that governs the story's narrative apparatus. On the other hand, one could just as easily interpret Gaines's gender stratification as the byproduct of a bygone cultural moment that counter-nanced anti-gay rhetoric to promulgate an undiluted black masulinist Nationalism. Thus, a more charitable reading of his comments might locate Gaines's juxtaposition of hetero- and homosexuality within the context of other black male writers for whom homosexuality served a primarily rhetorical function. Because Gaines does include Hattie within his black male spectrum, one could conjecture that his apparent condemnation of Hattie as a defiled representation of black masculinity is more rhetoric than anything else, and that what appear to be a priori anti-gay sentiments perhaps do not so much reflect the author's own personal animus as they reflect the views of a considerable number of 1960's black male writers and activists.

Toni Morrison's theorization of what she deems American Africanaism in Playing in the Dark is apposite here. She conceives this term to interrogate what she describes as "an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served" (6); she further remarks that "... the process of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africanaism became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony" (8). Comparable to Morrison's notion that blackness functions dialectically and pejoratively in bolstering constructions of whiteness, arguably, Gaines's use of the homosexual black man is analogous to the ways that Hemingway, Melville, and other white American male literary forefathers configured the Africanist pres-
ence as abject and other. In Gaines’s rhetorical grammar, gayness supplants Africanist as the marker for what is an unfiled, sacrosanct black masculinity—a compensatory hypermasculinity cultivated by scores of black men in response to real and perceived psychosexual castration. Hence, the textual conundrum that I am exploring has its analog in the author’s own comments and the context in which they were uttered. Perhaps Hattie is the incarnation of what might be deemed “gayness in the black male imaginary,” a sexual/textual touchstone for the cult of true manhood that is temporally fixed. Given such racio-cultural imperatives, one isn’t shocked that Munford and Procter denigrate Hattie as “the freak,” “a sad woman,” and “bitch,” epithets that function metonymically for disfigured, contaminated mis-enactments of true black manhood.

Still, the author’s comments designate Munford as the spokesman for an enshrined, unblemished manhood. Munford gleefully outs Hattie, revealing that Hattie was arrested for “playing with this man dick. . . . At this old flea-bitten back of town there. Up front—front row—there lie is playing with this man dick. Bitch” (127); notable again is the twinning of homophobia and sexism by the story’s spokesman for revitalized masculinity. The author would probably rationalize Munford’s subsequent propositioning of Hattie—Munford fetchingly declares, “Look here, . . . I got a few coppers and a few minutes—what you say me and you giving it a little whirl?” (139)—as mere situational same-sex desire, the jail cell being an acceptable venue for otherwise proscribed male-to-male contact. Alternatively, however, one could interpret Munford’s ad hoc jailhouse homosexuality, easily and dismissively rationalized, as evidence of the very instability of the homosexual/heterosexual binaries on which Gaines bases his rhetorical/fictive divisions. Within such a sexually carnivalesque zone, seemingly innocuous events like a fel-

low prisoner’s intervention upon Hattie’s and Munford’s quarreling with a commanding “Why don’t both of y’ all shut up” (128), as well as Procter’s remarking that Munford was “standing so close to me [at the head of his bunk], I could smell his breath every time he breathed in and out” (133), undermine Munford’s position as the apogee of an unencumbered, anti-gay black male subjectivity. Though it is overstating to say that Munford’s coterminal demonizing and propositioning of Hattie expose a latent homosexuality of his own, these actions do invite more careful scrutiny of all ostensibly homosocial encounters; several such encounters reveal a story that departs from the very gay-straight bisection that the author himself claims as his aesthetic blueprint.

In fact, when plumbing more carefully the text’s seemingly homophobic narrative contours, one discerns further such eruptions of masculine same-sex desire, moments when the love that dare not speak seems to scream from the characters’ frequent and indeterminable close encounters. What can be read as a proleptic instance of such a moment occurs during Procter’s recollection of the event that occasions his incarceration, the knifing of another black man, Bayou, in an apparent love triangle. This cataclysmic scene occurs at the Seven Spots, a southern juke-joint harkening back to the honkytonks immortalized by blues folk like Bessie Smith (herself sexually fluid) as brazenly secular, transgressive black spaces rife with blues, sensuality, carnality, and violence. Enticed by Bayou’s girlfriend Clara, Procter opines that she’s “dressed in red” and “roll[s] her big ass real slow and easy—just for me, just for me” (128). However, his sidekick “Grinning Boy” who, during this sexual cat-and-mouse dalliance, repeatedly designates Clara as “Poison, poison—nothing but poison” (128), initially restrains Procter. Sounding more like a jealous lover than a homeboy, Grinning Boy behaves in ways that at least evince his and the narrative’s sex-

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ual ambiguity. Though his repeated remonstrations go unheeded, one wonders about his own investment in Procter’s sexual escapades. As Gaines configures this episode, it can just as easily be interpreted as a multivariant sexual competition, recalling the vortex of desire that serves as the dramatic scaffolding for another classically southern tale, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I think of the polymorphous love triangle in which Stanley’s and Mitch’s competition for Blanche camouflages the men’s patently homoerotic interactions, as Blanche becomes the Girardian “mediating” site through which the men channel their taboo, unspeakable desire for each other.4

Similarly, Gaines’s competition “between men” could possibly veil Grinning Boy’s and Procter’s unutterable attraction to one another. In addition to his consternation regarding Procter’s subsequent inability to resist temptation and his ultimate killing of Bayou, Grinning Boy exhibits even more frantic if not histrionic behavior when he aids in Procter’s escape. As Procter drives during their frenetic flight from the crime scene, he repeatedly describes how Grinning Boy is “crying” and then ruminates that:

> After I had gone a good piece, I slammed on the brakes and told Grinning Boy to get out. He wouldn’t get out. I opened the door and pushed on him, but he held the steer’n’ wheel. He was crying and holding the wheel with both hands. I hit him and pushed on him and hit him and pushed on him, but he wouldn’t turn it loose. If they was go’n kill me, I didn’t want them to kill him. too. but he couldn’t see that. I shot away from there with the door still opened, and after we had gone a little piece, Grinning Boy reached out and got it and slammed it again. (132)

Grinning Boy’s impregnable devotion and even the violence that Procter exhibits in trying to dissuade his friend from abetting his crime are laden with homoerotic undercurrents. One wonders, for instance, to what degree sublimated heterosexualized violence—male-on-male pugilism ostensibly ignited by competition over a woman—functions as a normalizing praxis through which unsanctioned male-on-male desire is re-channeled and thereby emptied of stigmatized homoerotic suggestiveness. The notion of men projecting homoerotic feelings through violence certainly has both cultural and literary antecedents, from the notorious Leopold and Loeb kidnapping-murder case in the 1920s to Amiri Baraka’s 1964 play *The Toilet*, which ends with the hyperviolent young black male protagonist caressing a young white man whom he earlier felt compelled to stab in displaying his allegiance to his now absent black gang members.5 Thus, one takes particular notice of Procter’s description of the moment that he penetrates Bayou with the shard of a bottle: “I felt it go in his clothes and in his stomach and I felt the hot, sticky blood on my hand and I saw his face all twisted and sweaty. I felt his hands brush against mine when he threw both of his hands up to his stomach” (131).6 Such purple passages are jarring, for, again, they undercut the author’s and story’s repudiations of homoerotic desire as alien and anathema to an untrammeled, socially certified script of masculine behavior.

These redolent scenes, oozing with same-gender sexual energy, dramatize the story’s antinomian structure, where sanctioned heteronormativity collides with outlawed homocentricity. Reiterating the issue of the text’s self-contradictory impulses, I contend that, despite the characters’ perpetuation of the most malevolent stereotypes of black gayness, Hattie’s characterization belies Gaines’s own deliberate abjectification of him. Above I noted that Gaines published “Three Men” during the volcanic 1960s, a time of massive social upheaval that witnessed not only the liberation struggle of oppressed black communities, but also simultaneous demands for civil rights from women and gays. As Marlon Ross
perspicaciously observes, “When an open and autonomous culture of gays and lesbians began to form in America’s urban centers during the late 1960s, there already existed largely integrated within the African American community an established and visible tradition of homosexuality” (498). Perhaps inadvertently, “Three Men” nevertheless mirrors a cultural marriage of black and gay liberation movements, as Gaines’s positioning of Hattie within the story’s prison community attests to the pivotal role of gay men of color during the period’s social conflagrations. Though Gaines may have been oblivious to the simultaneity of such seismic cultural events, not to be ignored is the reality that “effeminate” men were stalwarts in black and gay rights movements: Bayard Rustin orchestrated the 1963 March on Washington; James Baldwin, unlike his more “masculine” literary paterfamilias Richard Wright, risked personal and artistic freedom by venturing into the South under FBI surveillance amidst regular death threats; and the 1969 Stonewall rebellion was propelled by a rainbow of transvestites—“sissies”—who were sick and tired of being sick and tired. Inarguably, these “brother outsiders” played indispensable roles in racial and sexual liberation struggles, despite withering attacks on them as “perverts” and omnipresent threats to out them to loosen the movement’s moral moorings.7 In dramatic contradistinction to the author’s stated intent (that is, Hattie as “defeatist” and “weak”), Hattie emerges as an oppositional and transcendent narrative force, given the plethora of correlative red-letter events in which black gays/gay blacks figured so prominently. Indeed, even within the circumscribing parameters of the text itself, Hattie represents a resistive presence—for instance, by rebuffing Munford’s licentious invitation, he refuses to be sexualized and commodified in a space where “effeminate” gay men are often subjected to brutal sexual assaults. Far from submitting to white and black male hege-

monies, Hattie becomes a fictive counterpart of other gay men of color who eschew a racially and culturally sanctioned cult of true black manhood.

Still, in spite of these almost inconsonant vestiges of a newly fashioned black gay subjectivity, Gaines’s aforementioned derogation of Hattie inexorably (mis)shapes the story’s climax and denouement. Upon Munford’s departure, Procter undergoes a transformation and adopts Munford’s revised terms of male subjectivity: he will go to the penitentiary instead of allowing his white “ overseer” to emancipate him.

Given this seemingly self-restorative act of racial resistance, one might be tempted to concur with William T. Mallon’s reading of Procter’s act as counter-patriarchal: “Once Procter conjoins manhood with self-determination, he escapes the barriers erected by traditional masculinity” (54). But such a finding rests on a rather hackneyed notion that reformed black male subjectivity emanates from a facile inversion of binaries of white and black patriarchies. As with orthodox Black Nationalist masculinity, defying whites becomes the sole touchstone of black male selfhood. Such critical perceptions, then, trivialize Procter’s hyper-masculine behavior, behavior that renders him more “traditional” in his newly garnered, revitalized masculine identity.

To instantiate Procter’s new codes of masculine conduct, Gaines ends the story with Procter’s passing (on)—racial and sexual colloquialistic suggestiveness intended—Munford’s lessons to a recently arrested 14-year-old, who replaces Munford after the senior prisoner’s release. Procter can barely conceal his disgust as Hattie pampers or “mothers” the teen, and Procter finally explodes in a paroxysmal rage: “I grabbed two handfuls of his [Hattie’s] shirt and jerked him up and slammed him ‘cross the cell. He hit against that bunk and started crying—just laying there, holding his side and crying like a woman” (152). He then proceeds to
force the boy to smoke, after which Procter symbolically “baptizes” him by washing his bloodied back. Certainly, one could filter this scene through the lens of Judith Butler’s Freud-inflected analysis: “Freud articulates a cultural logic whereby gender is achieved and stabilized through the accomplishment of heterosexual positioning, and where the threats to heterosexuality thus become threats to gender itself. . . . [I]n a man, the terror over homosexual desire may well lead to a terror over being construed as feminine, feminized, of no longer being properly a man, or of being a ‘failed’ man, or of being in some sense a figure of monstrosity or abjection” (24). Thus, Procter’s gay “terror” could have its genesis in his need to “stabilize” or consolidate his hallowed but fragile status as revivified male subject.

Alternatively but concomitantly, his belligerent response to Hattie’s nurturance might emanate from Procter’s compulsion to cloak his latent homosexual desires, which he thereby projects onto the overtly “feminine” male subject. Correlatively, recent psychosexual discourse has explored the architectonics of the gay basher’s psychosocial infrastructure, where repressed homosexual desire is sublimated and re-enacted in more socially acceptable anti-gay violence.8 Within this context, the earlier scene with Grinning Boy becomes an admurative moment of masking and displacement, where potentially homosexual desires manifested themselves in more “masculinely-correct” codes of hypersexual and hyperviolent conduct. If Munford’s desire for Hattie can be analogously read as his own veiled same-sex desire, then it is not farfetched to extrapolate that Procter’s initiating of same-sex intimacy may also hold the seeds of a suppressed gay identity, which are sprouting in his encounter with Hattie and the 14-year-old, and could possibly germinate during his impending incarceration in the state penitentiary.

Conversely, instead of cohering his tenuous grasp on patriarchal masculin-
ity, the gay bashing and the attendant masculine panic it catalyzes vitiate the inviolate masculinist ideal. Procter’s subsequent treatment of the 14-year-old prisoner reveals that Procter himself has inculcated the very deforming nurturing maternal instincts that he found so repellent in Hattie. The post-Munford Procter emerges as a synthesis of his mentor’s fiercely phallocentric masculinity and Hattie’s (if not also Gaines’s) transgressive, anti-masculinist masculinity. Though Procter verbally and physically assaults Hattie for overtly “feminine” expressions of tenderness, Procter reenacts this very behavior when he commands of his young charge, “Let’s wash your back” (154), which was preceded by Procter’s admission that “I felt some kind of love for this little boy.”9 Importantly, Procter is only five years older than his protégé, thereby rendering this “baptismal” episode less an instance of the homophobic pedophilia that Munford repudiated as part of Christianity’s emasculating apparatus (140) and more a reflection of a nascent same-sex desire that gay youth often express. Procter’s expression of “love” becomes his speaking of the unspeakable, in diametric opposition to his—and the author’s—coarse gender essentializing. Through a sort of gender-sexual alchemy, Procter is transmogrified into both Hattie—the homosexual/mother incarnate—and Munford—the homosexual (?) and phallocentric patriarchal ideal. At this pivotal narrative moment, “Three Men” becomes an imbrication of discrepant—or complementary—gender and sexual intersubjectivities.

I conclude my que(e)ry into Gaines’s ostensibly panegyric to 1960’s Black Nationalist masculinity by scrutinizing what might be described as the narrative’s gay semiotics, textual instances in which the very language of the story calls attention to heteronomativity, homosociality, homosexuality, and the attendant fluidity of what Gaines intends as discordant identities. I reiterate that the (in)advertent name-and word-plays are reminiscent of
Gaines’s Louisianan literary forebear Tennessee Williams. One must traverse, for instance, a lexical-sexual minefield when perusing the names of the dramatist’s most memorable—and sexually menaced—characters: Brick—read: “Dick”—Pollitt, the bedeviled gay protagonist whose irrepressible homosexual desires threaten to unravel his heterosexual football-hero façade in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof; or Mitch—“Bitch”—the bachelor-“mama’s boy” who worships Stanley Kowalski and whose burgeoning relationship with Blanche DuBois threatens to get “between men” in true Sedgwickian fashion. I let me preface my trek into this lexical-sexual terrain by again quoting Reid-Pharr, who cautions that his reading of poet Piri Thomas’s autobiography These Mean Streets is not informed by a desire to “out” the text by foregrounding its sub rosa gay “tendencies”: “Let me make it perfectly clear that what I am interested in here is not the cataloguing of homosexual content in the work of late twentieth-century Black male autobiographers, but instead a reading of homosexuality that pays attention to the way in which the homosexual stands in for the fear of crisis and chaos, or rather, the fear of slipping to the outside, that pervades the work of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century Black writers” (610).

Central to my argument is, of course, the notion of the homosexual as the ultimate signification of “brother outsider” status, the embodiment of black male non-normativity in terms of legitimized gender constructions. And like Reid-Pharr, I am not invested in over-determined “queerly correct” interpretations aimed at rooting out the supposed gay content under every thematric bed in the writer’s fictive habitat. Still, the unimpeachably gay-inflected narrative architecture of “The Three Men” juts throughout the text, most unassailably in one area: nomenclature.

Incontestably, writers mark characters nominally, no less so in the African American short story than in other genres. To be sure, when Ann Petry assigned the moniker “Johnson” to the psychosocially castrated protagonist of her oft-anthologized 1947 short story “Like a Winding Sheet,” or when Chester Himes chose “Dick Small” as the signifier for the feckless headwaiter-protagonist in his 1937 “Salute to the Passing,” both authors purposefully commingled issues of gender, race, and social impotence via naming. Because naming figures just as centrally in “Three Men” vis-à-vis the characters’ racial-sexual identity, I conjecture that Gaines calculatedly selected the name “Hattie” to conjure images of I Hattie McDaniel, an actress whose filmography is replete with portrayals of one of the most belabored images in America’s racial consciousness, the mammy. McDaniel’s Oscar-winning portrayal in Gone with the Wind remains firmly implanted in our collective memories of Margaret Mitchell’s histrionic paean to the unvanquishable South.

An abiding vestige of our cultural and historical psychologies, the mammy becomes the pinnacle of black self-regulation and black complicity with a puissant white patriarchal enterprise. Folklorist Patricia Turner incisively disentangles this prototype/stereotype in her reading of filmmaker D. W. Griffith’s “magnum opus”:

Audiences cheered when the stalwart mammy in D. W. Griffith’s 1915 epic The Birth of a Nation (based on Thomas Dixon’s popular 1905 novel The Clansman) defends her white master’s household from the attacks of marauding black and white Union soldiers. She . . . never takes advantage of her freedom. From that point on, few films depicting the “old South” omitted mammy as a stock character. Most resembled the Birth of a Nation mammy; they were plump, dark-skinned, abundantly clothed, white-identified black women tenaciously loyal to their masters and mistresses. The Birth of a Nation did, however, introduce a new trait into the attribute cluster of the prototypical mammy. In a climactic scene in which black soldiers forcibly enter the Camerons’ home, the robust mammy—the role was actually played by a white male actor—physically assaults them. (51-52; italics added)
This passage strikes at many race and gender constructs, and also highlights the mammyn in terms of gender performance and its malleability (that is, the white male as mammyn in a sort of race and gender transvestitism), which underlie these socially manufactured roles. Within this socioliterary context, Gaines’s Hattie becomes a mirror opposite—a male mammyn—of the figure that Turner outlines. His penchant for sass and invective, such as his frequent references to Munford as a “beast,” coupled with his indefatigable care-giver instincts, reflects his attenuated position as faux black male vis-à-vis the combative, anachronistic form of masculinity that both Munford and Procter esteem. Gaines situates his male mammyn as a tool of an intractably hegemonic American system committed to black men’s emotional, psychic, and in some cases physical evisceration—hence, Hattie’s attempts to corral Munford’s primordial masculine instincts as well as Hattie’s attendant (s)mothering of Procter’s burgeoning hyper-masculine identity. Gaines appears to earmark this character for ridicule and scorn as the incarnation of symbiotic scourges: the effeminate black man and the homosexual. Alternatively, however, Gaines’s denotative scapegoating belies what I read as Hattie’s counter-patriarchal masculinity: Hattie refuses Munford’s demands for sex in exchange for money (139), and he earlier engaged in public sex acts (127), for which he is currently incarcerated. These transgressive acts defy racial and social codes that proscribe both black male sexual difference and public expressions of same-sex desire. Hattie as mammyn, unlike his cinematic female counterpart, defies categorization, enacting nuanced protocols of masculine conduct that turn designators like sissy or faggot on their socially confining heads.

In contrast to the race and culture bases that inform my reading of Hattie’s name, I proffer a more etymologically-grounded interrogation of his surrogate son/tormentor. Whereas Hattie evokes dually the feminized male, and by way of inversion, the masculinized female, Procter’s name can be juxtaposed with its euphonic corollary, “Proctor.”

Though it requires some alphabetical sleight-of-hand, one sees the legitimacy of Herman Beavers’s claim that “The word ‘proctor’ is used to describe anyone in a supervisory position, particularly one who oversees an examination or test. Procter’s importance rests on his ability to carry out the experiment Munford has proposed: that the task of valuing other lives begins with valuing one’s own life” (30). Such an interpretation is reasonable enough, given the OED’s definition of Proctor as “a steward”; as well, the role that Procter assumes with the younger prisoner conforms to the word’s standard denotation of “advocate, patron, defender, guardian” (OED Online). Incontestably, Procter invokes Munford’s teachings as he ushers his young charge into a renewed gender subjectivity that counters the de rigueur equating of masculinity with aggression and black masculinity with sociopathic acts of intraracial violence.

Looked at from a more oblique angle, however, the OED definition of “Procto” holds currency as well: “Gr. anus, used to form modern scientific terms medical and surgical, rarely zoological” (OED Online). Hence, the name assumes biological and, more germanely, sexual denotations and connotations as well. This gloss on “procto,” then, unclosets issues of anality that dovetail with my foregrounding of the story’s homosexual—as opposed to homophilic—cues. Such an extrapolation would situate Procter as less a mentee-cum-mentor and instead reposision him as a participant/agent within an array of sexual triangulations—Procter/Grinning Boy/Clara; Procter/Hattie/Munford; Procter/Hattie/14-year-old prisoner. Other instances of colloquial double-entendre, such as Procter’s reflecting that “I believe in being straight with a man” (149) and
his queery suggestive query during the baptismal back washing of the newly arrived underling — "You got a daddy?" (153) — resonate within a distinctively gay colloquial lexicon. Moreover, the ritualized smoking that Procter initiates (152) forms another homoeroticly-suggestive act. And if Munford's pedophilic (per)version of Christianity holds sway, Procter is recast in the story's climax as minister/predator, as he exhorts his supplicant to "pray like a man" (153) in the face of Proctor's decision to go to the state penitentiary and thereby reject his white benefactor's intercession, an intervention that would free Procter physically but further enslave him within the white patriarchy's dehumanizing machinery. Thus, Procter-Proctor-Procto—becomes the floating signifier, alternatively a sexualized object and a sexualizing subject within a multiplicity of conflicting racial, sexual, and religious claims on his identity.

Its sexually ambiguous denouement and questions surrounding nomenclature are integral to my reading of "Three Men," where the very parochial narrative of uniform masculinity that informed Gaines's stated aesthetic choices is destabilized. What emerges is a nuanced, multivalent representation of black masculinity that problematizes the dictates of "true manhood." So, at best the narrative could be read as indeterminable. Ostensibly, Gaines's positioning of his "three men" reifies an alternative construct of black masculinity that countenances homosocial desire through nonsexual same-sex love. But paradoxically, the story's "sissy-phobia" and climactic anti-gay violence reflect a regressive, sacrosanct "strong black manhood" espoused in 1960's homophobic Black Nationalist discourse; or it could be read as evidence of black men "slipping" into the interstices of masculine desire and worrying the line that demarcates homosexuality and homosociality. Perhaps Gaines faced a dilemma as a black man writing within the parameters of bombastically prescriptive black masculinist nationalistic discourse (and during what many now regard as the "second renaissance" of black writing), one that excoriates Baldwin for being gay and thereby testosterone-deficient. Whatever the underpinnings of the novelist's sexual-gender framework, the story's narrative scaffolding, infrastructure, and conclusion limn its self-deconstruction, for they destabilize their own—and the author's—endorsement of a sanctioned phallocentric masculine ontology that forecloses alternative ways of being black, masculine, sexual.

I return, then, to my epigraphic quotations from Gaines and southern literature critic Fred Hobson. Hobson speaks of Gaines's southern-spun "conservatism," a welcome writerly mien that captures his laudable refusal to encase his fiction in what the critic decries as "editorializing" and "special pleading" (94). But this very conservatism ultimately corrodes Gaines's otherwise praiseworthy attempts to reconfigure black male subjectivity. Conjuring memories of Faulkner, the grand master of white southern fiction who gestured toward reconstructing black subjects but whose cancerous racial inheritance would never permit him to imagine a black subject far removed from being a "nigger," Gaines similarly maintains a commendable impulse to remedy chronically anemic definitions of black manhood. While Gaines can unqualifyingly agree with an interviewer's sycophantic avowal that "you [Gaines] are much better at your Black people than Faulkner" (Lowe 132), the abiding conservatism of his artistic imagination yields an unstable masculine ontology, where a black man's homosexual identity and his racial self seem, ultimately, irreconcilable.
1. For examples of black male writers whose texts are set in prisons or whose characters have served time, see Himes’s 1952 novel Cast the First Stone, which was republished in 1999 as Yesterday Will Make You Cry; Knight’s Poems from Prison (1968); Wideman’s autobiographical Brothers and Keepers (1984), which treats his brother’s incarceration among other topics; and August Wilson’s Jitney (1979), Fences (1986), Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (1988), and Two Trains Running (1992), none of which is actually set in a prison but all depict several characters who have served time.

2. In a 1983 interview, Gaines rather blithely appears to rationalize (if not outright condone) sexual violence in “A Long Day in November,” also published in the collection Bloodline. The story traces a day in the life of Sonny, a six-year-old from whose point of view the story is told; his mother, Amy; and his father, Eddie. Having left Eddie for what she deemed his puerile adoration of his car, Amy agrees to return only if Eddie publicly torches it. The story concludes with Eddie’s beating Amy, the violent behavior enacted at her behest to counter the appearance that she dominates—and thereby emasculates—him within their household. Replying to an interviewer’s startled reaction to the story’s denouement—“That gives a lot of trouble: wife beating under any circumstances is a bit hard to explain!”—Gaines reasons, “She [Amy] insisted on that because she knew the people would laugh and make fun of her husband for having to burn up his car just to get his wife back home again. And the last thing she wanted, I think the last thing any woman wants—I’m not up to date on what women think and feel, but I think the last thing they want is for someone to laugh at their mates. And she says, ‘Ok, if you put a mark on me with this switch and you hurt me, then they will not have anything to laugh at: they’ll see that you are a man after all, ‘cuso most of them said you were not’” (Lowe 15/-58).

3. In addition to Harper, a cadre of current critics, writing from a black gay theoretical perspective, have documented and assailed a phallocentric orthodoxy that prevailed in the 1960s, in which stentorian anti-gay rhetoric was countenanced in the name of Afrocentric resistance. In addition to the critics I reference in this essay (Reid-Pharr, Ross, and McCoy), see also McBride and Johnson, especially “Manifest Faggotry: Quowering Masculinity in African American Culture” (48-75).

4. I allude, of course, to Girard’s Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure, the foundational study of mediated/triangular desire in literature. I am grateful for Jonathan Goldberg’s early treatment of palimpsestic sexual competition between and among the sexes; see “Romeo and Juliet’s Open Ra,” his prescient essay on the topos of triangulation and homosexual/homosexual desire in the play that contests well-rehearsed heterocentric critical readings.

5. One of the original “crimes of the century” (predating the Lindbergh baby and O. J. Simpson), the case of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb is a sort of ur-narrative of homosexual desire possibly being sublimated through violence. According to Higdon, their murder of 14-year-old Bobby Franks in Chicago on May 21, 1924, was a “random” and “thrill” killing; further, he asserts, “There were sexual overtones, including rumors that the pair were ‘perverts,’ further titillating the public” (8). Higdon subsequently cites testimony from a psychiatrist in the case, who confirmed the men’s homosexuality. Ironically, following their conviction, fellow inmate James Day viciously murdered Loeb, stabbing him 56 times with a razor. His lawyer effectively invoked the notorious “gay panic defense,” and Day was acquitted; the rabidly homophobic climate in which Loeb’s murder occurred was summarized by a juror, who reasoned, “Nobody liked a queer, a homo, or a lesbian, which all seems okay today [1974] . . . so it was a good thing to get rid of such people” (301). Literary iterations of this gay discursive formation include works such as Herman Melville’s Billy Budd; see Sarotte’s groundbreaking work of gay literary scholarship Like a Brother, Like a Lover: Male Homosexuality in the American Novel and Theatre from Herman Melville to James Baldwin for his “queer”-inflected (as opposed to queer “theoretical”) interrogation of Melville’s nautical novella of violence as a subterfuge for same-sex desire. More recently, younger African American writers have thematized violence as a gay sexual outlet as well. One especially affecting text is Bennett Capper’s short story “Nobody Gets Hurt” in the path-breaking Shade: An Anthology of Fiction by Gay Men of African Descent. Briefly, the story revolves around an intermittent relationship between two men in their early twenties, Roy and Paris (both probably named in tribute to James Baldwin—the former being a character from Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953), the latter being Baldwin’s refuge from an unceasingly racist and homophobic America). Acceding to his mother’s death-bed wish, Paris weds her nurse, Cassandra, despite the fact that he and Roy previously enjoyed a relationship where they “fucked like crazy” (21). In response to Paris’s violation of their lifelong bond and rebuffing of Roy’s persistent advances, Roy risks his life by robbing a gas station, where he is wounded by a gunshot to the thigh. Groper and bleeding in his squalid apartment afterwards, Roy affectionately utters, “I knew you would come.” Paris then epiphanically ruminates, “. . . this was all for me. The robbery. To spend time with me”
(27). Capers cannily conjoins Baldwin, the black writer most recognized as a gay iconoclast, with Amiri Baraka, a dramatist who publicly disavowed homosexuality but who wrote the play The Toilet, the denouement of which extols the virtues of same-sex desire.

6. Procter's recollection of the murder recalls Blanche and Stanley's climactic confrontation in Streetcar, where she brandishes a broken bottle at her rampaging brother-in-law: in response to Stanley's asking "Why did you do that for?" Blanche replies, "So I could twist the broken end in your face!" (130). These characters' simmering attraction courses throughout the play, so Blanche's defense might be read as sadomasochistic sexual jockeying, what Stanley subsequently labels "roughhouse"; his ultimate raping of her, however, renders this scene as one of sexual violation, and not violent sex play.

7. I allude here to the PBS documentary Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin, the title of which is a play on black lesbian writer Audre Lorde's essay collection entitled Sister Outsider (1984). For further discussions on the FBI's surveillance of Baldwin, see Robins and Wallace, especially "I'm Not Entirely What I Look Like": Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and the Hegemony of Vision; or Jimmy's FBE Eyes" (133-46).

8. Psychiatry professor Martin Kantor concludes the following about the homophobia-homophilia nexus: "Repressing homophobes discover all too soon that repression works only incompletely to suppress their homosexuality/anger toward homosexuals. Not only will the closet door not stay closed, but the homosexuality, and the associated anger, come oozing out around the edges and seem to attract the most inner attention. . . . This oozing is particularly pronounced in homophobic men whose masculinity is challenged in real life, say after an attempted gay seduction, provoked or otherwise" (80).

9. One of the few critics to acknowledge Hattie's pivotal role in Procter's maturation, Babb asserts that "Hattie's influence is essential to Procter's revising his notion of masculinity" (31). She also identifies Hattie's contribution to Procter's emotional growth: "Watching the kindness Hattie administers to the youth, however, changes Procter's assessment, and the traits he once equated with effeminacy he now sees as indicative of compassion. Hattie teaches him how to respond to others in a humane manner" (31). However, I depart from Babb's assumption that Procter rides himself of rigid and essentialistic configurations of gender: echoing other scholarly treatments of this story, Babb excludes the gay bashing from her otherwise insightful analysis.

10. See Benston's seminal "I Yam What I Am: the Topos of (Un)Naming in Afro-American Literature," in Black Literature and Literary Theory, as an early exploration of the trope of naming in black literature. Helping to fill the scholarly lacunae in this area, King includes a chapter on A Gathering of Old Men, though she does not address the role of naming in Gaines's other novels or short stories.

11. Scholars have often "corrected" Procter's name to reflect the misspelling "Proctor": see Babb, Byerman, and Lowe.

12. The online "Gay Slang Dictionary" offers several connotative definitions for daddy, all of which are apposite vis-à-vis the burgeoning relationship between Procter and the neophyte prisoner whom he initiates: 1. older man who shows affection for his male lover with gifts. Synonymous: sugar daddy. 2. (prison slang) an old inmate that takes a young male as his punk [sic], acts as the boy's bodyguard, keeping other inmates from him, and he is the master of the boy. The boy is his sex slave. 3. a male lover 4. a man who likes a young lover to whom he plays a fatherly role. It can imply spanking or other discipline. "The term straight has a relatively parochial meaning in terms of sexuality. Jonathan Green's The Dictionary of Contemporary Slang provides the most widely circulated definitions: 1. a conventional person" and "2. (homosexual use) a heterosexual person" (271). I would like to thank Cynthia Fuchs, my colleague in the English department, who directed me to these sources.

13. My interpretation of the smoking scene as potentially homoerotic is informed by McDowell's provocative reading of Nello Larson's Passing, a Harom Ronaisanco novel that McDowell interro- gates as a potentially subservient lesbian tale camouflaged by heteronormative content. Substantiating her claim that Irene Redfield pushes Clare Kendry to her death, to kill her own latent desire for Clare, McDowell posts: "I suggest the extent to which Clare's death represents the death of Irene's sexual feelings for Clare, Larsen uses a clever objective correlative: Irene's pattern of lighting cigarettes and snuffing them out. Minutes before Clare falls from the window to her death, 'Irene finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the tiny spark drop slowly down to the white ground below.' Clearly attempting a symbolic parallel, Clare is described as 'a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold' who falls from (or is thrown out of) the window as well. Because Clare is a reminder of that repressed and disowned part of Irene's self, Clare must be banished, for, more unacceptable than the feelings themselves is the fact that they find an object of expression in Clare. In other words, Clare is both the embodiment and the object of the sexual feelings Irene banishes" (McDowell xxix).

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