When Ernest Gaines published *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* in 1971, he secured his footing within the American literary world as an important artist. The critical acclaim was nearly unanimous, and the transformation of the work into a popular television drama embellished that success. But Gaines’ quiet vision of endurance was no sudden occurrence. With the patience of a journeyman becoming master of his vision, his view of life had been worked out in three previous books; of these earlier works, *Bloodline*, a cycle of short stories published in 1968, is a minor-keyed masterpiece. This is so, despite an age in which easy praise inflates achievement.

To discuss *Bloodline* properly, one must grant that a writer need not strain with an overreaching ambition to create significance in his fiction; he may instead make his mark by accurately recreating the texture of ordinary life, and leave it to us to discover the subtleties of the specific milieu he knows thoroughly. In this sense, *Bloodline* is a worthy descendant of Turgenev’s *Sportsman’s Sketches* and Joyce’s *Dubliners*. It is equally evocative of ordinary life. Within the specific tradition of Afro-American literature, however, *Bloodline* is of even more pressing importance.

*Bloodline* has significance because it is in line with, though still different from, past landmarks of Afro-American short fiction. Charles Chesnutt’s *Conjure Woman and Other Stories*, Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, and Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children*—all, like Gaines’ *Bloodline*, concern themselves chiefly with the South, that “old country” of racial memory. In these works, successive generations of particular writers, each with some tie to the South, wrestled to divine the significance of that “old country.” The works are important for that reason. Further, with regard to their importance and place in an ethnic short-prose tradition, these works are outstanding precisely because they are very much more than collections of separate pieces. Each writer
in his own way—Chesnutt by undermining the Plantation Tradition, Toomer by evoking the mysteries of racial memory, Wright by the programmatic ordering of horror—constructs a whole with far greater significance than that of its separate pieces. In this regard, *Bloodline*, too, urges us beyond the bare sum of its parts, while, even more than its predecessors, accepting the ordinariness of the lives it sketches.

It assumes that, in witnessing these lives, we will find in their situations a cumulative importance and power. *Bloodline* urges respect for its protagonists and for the circumstances that affect their development. This essay, then, proposes to devote itself to treating each story in terms of its evocation of the encompassing scene and of stages in the human life cycle. By scene I mean milieu. By life cycle I refer to Erik Erikson’s eight epigenetic phases: in stories one and two, on childhood, primarily stage four, with some reference to stage six; in the next story, primarily stages five and six; in the next, primarily stages seven and eight; and, finally, primarily stage eight. All the stories, in short, have to do with childhood or youth in relation to literal or symbolic parenthood. As we shall see, the stories, in reaching from one generation to another, bear upon each other and assume an order that is important.

Gaines’ world is the cane country of rural Louisiana: the modest dwellings of its black peasant population, the inevitable plantation, the nearby town. From story to story in *Bloodline*, the scene shifts to the various parts of this ecology, focusing upon black life.

“A Long Day in November,” the first story, is set entirely within the black community encompassed by “The Quarters” and its environs. The scene is peopled with the assorted neighbors of the struggling family that is in focus: these neighbors include relatives and, of course, those guardians of the community’s psychological life, the preacher and the conjure woman. The family itself consists of two young adults and their six-year-old son, Sonny. The child is centrally important, for it is through his eyes, in first-person narrative, that we come to know the scene as well as begin the exploration of childhood perception that occupies Gaines through his first two stories.

Upon the story’s opening, the issue at hand ostensibly is simply going to the potty. From deep under his warm covers, Sonny hears his mother’s voice coaxing him out of the bed “to wee-wee.” Naturally, he does not want to emerge, but he does, not out of fear but out of trust in his mother’s reassurances. For every unwelcome shock of cold to hit Sonny, his mother’s voice
reinforces her presence and her body's radiating warmth. Sonny has left his pot on the chicken coop, out in the cold yard, but, as he has apparently already learned trust, autonomy, and initiative, he confronts the yard. His mother instructs him, and out in the cold he goes:

I can see the big pecan tree over by the other fence by Miss Viola Brown's house. Miss Viola Brown must be sleeping because it's late at night. I bet you nobody else in the quarter's up now. I bet you I'm the only little boy up. They got plenty stars in the air, but I can't see the moon. There must be ain't no moon tonight . . . . That pecan tree's shadow's all over the back yard.

In numerous scenes like the above, Gaines conveys through diction and language rhythm a child's characteristics and sense of place. We see that the strengths which Sonny develops are to an extent dependent upon the quality of nurture he receives; and as the child develops, so will the man, in the sense of the proverb, "The child is father to the man." Also we are given some inkling of the impact of the larger community scene upon the development of individual character.

As his parents struggle towards intimacy and maturity, so they are being watched, perceived if not fully understood, through the eyes of their child. The young couple has come to a crisis in their marriage. Eddie spends an inordinate amount of time caring for his prized possession, a car, while Amy builds a towering resentment that comes to a head on this particular cold day in November. She leaves him, fleeing to her mother, "Gran'mon," herself as divisive a force as any dozen cars. But before day's end, Gran'mon's daughter returns. Her anguished husband has facilitated this return by seeking counsel, first futilely from the preacher, then the conjure woman, and then again from the latter—this time successfully. The successful animation of Eddie towards his goal of restoring his family must be seen as a persistent pilgrimage with his son and a willingness to rely upon a community elder for insight. No matter that Mme. Toussaint, who lives further back in the woods than most residents, holds an unofficial position. She is a connection to intuition and to dimly remembered traditions on the Mother Continent. Unlike the perfunctory preacher who, with his glasses on, cannot see Sonny and his father, she looks into the fire of human predicament. She is a teacher, testing Eddie's persistence and his readiness to change. Eddie, for his part, like his churchgoing neighbors, wants guidance. What is so important and must filter through to the child, is that out of his individual pain the father reaches outward, does not withdraw, relies upon an agency
within his particular society to delineate precisely, however cryptically, the social task. By burning his car, he is symbolically demonstrating his readiness for intimacy, that capacity crucial to young adulthood that Erikson calls:

the capacity to commit (oneself) to concrete affiliations and partnerships and to develop the ethical strength to abide by such commitments, even though they may call for significant sacrifices and compromises.³

The social task, however, is only partly completed by the burning; Amy also has to demonstrate publicly, and by the community's mores, her own capacity for intimacy. This she does partly by her return home, but she, herself, senses it is not enough. Her insistence that her husband beat her, bizarre though it may appear, is a public break from the stern umbilical cord of "Gran'mon," and a public announcement of her husband's stature in her own eyes, in other words, her own sacrifice for the sake of intimacy. Giving us an encompassing social scene into which both character and action are thoroughly integrated, Gaines defines two maturing adults who, by at least the lights of the community, and of the child, are able to function for the welfare of the child.

Gaines is, I believe, clearly interested in demonstrating the concentric circles of social support that are crucial to human development, in this case most especially the child's. At the outer ring, neighbors, for example, are necessary for the family's survival. If there are men, and an interfering mother-in-law, who would be only too happy to encourage a wife's estrangement, there are also those anxious to support the family's stability: "Sure, Brother," says one, "Anything to bring a family back together" (p. 57). At the inner ring, the family itself is necessary for the child. When Sonny, for example, senses his parents' hurt and estrangement from each other, he becomes anxious. When this is compounded by what to him are profound disruptions of normal family routine, for instance his mother's helping in his school preparations, he finds himself less able to tackle the learning tasks which are typically part of this stage of psychosocial development, tasks defined by Erikson as "the concept of industry." Instead of demonstrating competence in this systematic mastering of skills, he in fact regresses: he wets himself in class. By contrast, once Sonny's parents have indeed established their intimacy and he feels secure again, he enjoys anticipating his performance. The story's closing scene, which brings full circle the comfort of the opening scene, offers precisely such a moment wherein the parents' resolution of their own stage of psychosocial development coincides perfectly with the child's.
The second story, called appropriately "The Sky is Gray," also deals with childhood, the general and particular circumstances of a black child a generation ago in the rural South, what he must learn about his physical and social environment. It, too, concerns the psychosocial stage of development that Sonny was entering. In the most conventional sense, the systematic instruction characteristic of this stage occurs in school. There is, in fact, specific reference made to school. James, the eight-year-old protagonist, is trying to concentrate on a poem by Edgar Allen Poe:

I think of that poem. "Annabel Lee." I ain't been to school in so long—this bad weather—I reckon they done passed "Annabel Lee" by now. But passed it or not, I'm sure Miss Walker go'n make me recite it when I get there. That Woman don't never forget nothing. I ain't never seen nobody like that in my life (p. 112).

The importance here is that James is concentrating on this poem in order to take his mind off the numbing cold weather, as he and his mother walk, poorly clothed and with no money for food, back and forth through a small town, waiting for an indifferent dentist to find the time to see them. James is in fact receiving an intensive education, but one outside of school. His mother is his teacher, and what he is learning is to survive his harsh environment and take on prematurely the duties of an adult.

Life in Louisiana cane country would appear to be harsh under any circumstances, but for James' family it is especially difficult. His father, taken off to war by the Army, may never return. His mother, struggling in the fields through all kinds of weather in order that her family might have a chance at subsistence, may be working her way to an early grave. Above all things, she is determined that her son will learn quickly the responsibilities, the survival skills, and the dignity necessary to help maintain the household, which includes four younger brothers and an aunt. Already he is a very serious little boy, willing to apply himself to skills and tasks which, characterizing this stage of development, "go far beyond the mere playful expression of his organ-modes or the pleasure in the function of his limbs." When, for instance, he and his little brother are playing with some hunting hounds and the younger boy suggests going hunting, the hunt is undertaken in earnest and a rabbit caught. However, even James is not prepared for learning how harsh the subordination of play to survival can be. The killing of two pet redbirds for food makes the point. When he refuses to kill, his mother slaps him. With that, her instructions to her son are "'That's one.'... 'Get the other
one’” (p. 89). When he further refuses, she turns on him in fury. This onslaught, however, by an austere mother whose mind is full of work and worry about the next bit of food, is not long misunderstood. The extended family, his aunt and the friend, Monsieur Bayonne, “talked to me and made me see.” James’ love for his mother is in no way lessened. In fact, his love and understanding prompt him to bear stoically the severe pain of a toothache for days, until his mother discovers the secret and makes plans to go into town to the dentist: if she did not want him to be a crybaby or, like a baby boy, to put his arms around her, then he could demonstrate his love for her by keeping a secret and helping to eliminate some of her worry.

This impressive story, Gaines’ “Long Black Song,” is primarily a study in character as it is formed under the pressure of milieu. Since it is told in first-person narration from the point of view of this eight-year-old, we are primarily interested in his development, the circumstances which explain it and which, in some instances, will arise in the future to complicate it. The story begins, properly speaking, with the trip to the dentist. This is the means by which Gaines expands the book’s social dimension beyond the vicinity of the quarter and the means by which James embarks upon an odyssey of exploration into that world. He can hardly wait for the bus to take them there, as the opening words of narration indicate: “Go’n be coming in a few minutes. Coming round that bend . . . and we go’n get on it and go.” In his usual deft manner, Gaines prepares us for the dichotomy of expectation and reality that lies ahead for James, both in the immediate sense of an arrival in town and the symbolic sense of an arrival at adulthood.

Eagerly awaiting the bus, the child, unconsciously evoking Bessie Smith, describes more than he knows: “I keep on looking for it, but Mama don’t look that way no more. She’s looking down the road where we just come from. It’s a long old road . . .” (p. 83). When they do arrive in town, James and his Mama pass a school that he cannot attend, stores that they cannot afford to patronize, and a courthouse where neither of them can obtain justice. Hard by the courthouse and its confederate flag is their destination; the child again sees more than he can presently understand, though not more than he will come to know:

I see the flag waving there. This flag ain’t like the one we got at home. This one here ain’t got but a handful of stars. One at school got a big pile of stars—one for every state. We pass it and we turn and there it is—the dentist office (p. 93).

This house of pain is an appropriate forum for what they are
about to encounter: the pain of the minister of acquiescence, forced implicitly to acknowledge his gorge of frustration; the pain of the young college student, whose voice eloquently pierces the wilderness: "'I'm not mad at the world. I'm questioning the world... What do words like Freedom, Liberty, God, White, Colored mean? I want to know'" (p. 97). The words of this young student are informing the black occupants of this white dentist's waiting room, whether they know it or not, that their milieu is changing. Fit words, though he may not understand them, for a child of James' years to hear. One wonders how his education, formal and informal, will be affected by what he has encountered here. And particularly one wonders how, given James' disciplined preparation for adulthood, this pre-adolescent boy will define his identity with respect to the white world. It is impossible to say, but two modes of interaction with whites are demonstrated: the pretense of James and his mother when they are regarded as categories, as in the eyes of the nurse and the owner of the hardware store; and their honesty, when recognized as human beings, as in the eyes of the old lady in the small grocery who feeds them and sells them 25¢ worth of salt pork. When James' mother tells the old lady, "'Your kindness will never be forgotten,'" she, herself, is acknowledging the mutuality of respect that has emerged in that encounter, particularly the lack of patronization, even with regard to the sale of the meat. Her words about kindness are followed immediately by a sharp call to her son. James' mother is determined to keep her integrity as an adult responsible for the education of her child, to keep intact her own "'systematic instruction.'" In the tradition of many a black mother under the South's system of caste and class, her own system may be stern, but it is consistent and understood by her son, hence a reliable guide for his development. The old woman intuitively understands this, and by respecting it allows an unspoken collaboration in admitting a momentary element of light into a day and society otherwise overcast.

Bayonne, not much of a town, but the closest thing to an economic and political nexus to be found in this rural landscape, is also the setting for "'Three Men,'" third in Gaines' cycle. It is a story wherein we see the action of whites over blacks defined in terms of the economic power of the surrounding plantation system and its police power, but most of all in terms of the accompanying psychosocial conditioning. In the previous story, Gaines introduced the theme of racial conflict, witnessed through the eyes of an eight-year-old and dramatized by a young man emerging from adolescence. Now the implications of that conflict
experiences an important catharsis when he tracks his emotional repression back to his family. But observe in this connection that it occurs only after he has begun to think about Munford’s analysis of the overall economic and racial system that has conditioned everyone. With this analysis, he begins to understand his own disaffection. His solution is to remain in jail and by taking responsibility for what he has done, to stand up to the plantation system and its police arm; and it is to designate himself a surrogate parent to the fourteen-year-old boy who is thrown into his cell when Munford leaves. The title “Three Men,” then, moves us clearly towards appreciating again the importance of one of Gaines’ most important concerns, one emphasized in each story, the connection between generations and the acceptance of the responsibilities of literal or symbolic parenthood.

Gaines’ fourth story, “Bloodline,” told through the eyes of an old man, brings to us another young adult struggling with the connection between generation and with the cankered root of family. The setting is a plantation once part of the region’s economic backbone but now in decay. It is where, twenty-four years ago, Copper was born to the owner and one of the black women he fancied. That planter, Walter Laurent, is now dead, having been killed, as though in symbolic justice, by a black stallion; his surviving brother, Frank (in his late sixties and ailing) now struggles to maintain the land. Young man Copper, having been forced out into the wider world when a child, has now returned “home,” implicitly to collect what he regards as his patrimony. He is regarded by many to be mad and, like Ralph Ellison’s “vet,” may well be one of life’s shell-shocked seers, though unlike the “vet,” he has not yet been broken. He is a visionary: “‘The earth for everybody. Just like the sun for everybody. Just like the stars for everybody’” (p. 161). He is also prescient in realizing that this old South milieu is undergoing a sea change. He is bold, insisting on the right of a descendant to address his uncle with more than minimal, discreet visibility; his manner, which is as military as any white Confederate forebear, and his army garb, demand full visibility. He will permit neither himself nor his cause—social justice for all the dispossessed—to be “illegitimate.”

His very presence causes consternation throughout the plantation, especially in the minds of the enfeebled Frank and the aged maternal great aunt Amalia; this is shared to an extent by the seventy-year-old black retainer Felix, through whose eyes the story is told. In fact, the psychological focus of the story is not so
much upon Copper, for he knows his mind: at this sixth stage of life, young adulthood, he is seeking a kind of intimacy, a symbolic fusion with both his black aunt and his white uncle. He proposes a reconciliation of family and community on a different social order from that of the ancien regime; if he must, he will fight, as we know he does, with the fury of one unafraid of combat. He knows what he is fighting for and can thus commit himself fully. As Gaines’ culminating figure of young adulthood, an age dramatized in the first story in relation to childhood and in relation to older generations by the college student and Procter in the second and third stories, the character of Copper both interests us in his own right and moves us on to a consideration of old age. Copper is, one might say, a catalyst, drawing out from Frank, Amalia, and Felix (all approximately the same age) the final issue in the human life cycle, that of ego integrity.

The main focus is on Frank, who at once seems close to approximating ego integrity and yet tragically is kept from it by the contradictory social values he has internalized. About this concept, Erikson tells us, “Only in him who in some way has taken care of things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointments adherent to being . . . only in him may gradually ripen the fruit of [the previous] seven stages. I know of no better word for it then ego integrity.” One cannot deny that over the years Frank has tried to take care of things and people; he has struggled to preserve the plantation entrusted to him, and has provided food, shelter, and medicine for the people dependent on him. His self concept is that of patriarch. In one sense, he does approach a kind of ego integrity by adhering to the only code he knows as the last of the old Laurents; in this sense, he is respected by both Amalia and Felix, for they, too, understand that code. It is a code of respect for family, immediate and extended, a set of responsibilities and a way of life established by living communally, if in strict social hierarchy, and close to the land. This is part of what Frank is defending, and in part it can be explained:

Although aware of the relativity of all the various life styles which have given meaning to human striving, the possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his own life style against all physical and economic threats. For he knows that an individual life is the accidental coincidence of that one life cycle with that one segment of history; and that for him all human integrity stands or falls with the one style of integrity that he partakes.

However, there is in Frank’s conscience a deep cleavage; his code is so rigidly defined by a color caste that he must in fact disown
part of his family because of the prevailing economic and social system that brands that part "totally illegitimate." By this rule, he must disown as well what he has already allowed himself, affection for Amalia. Copper’s insistence on legitimacy does reach Frank’s cleavage of conscience, which is perhaps more precisely a conflict between his mind and heart: fittingly he suffers from a heart condition. Staggering from the conflict within him, he tries to rationalize a defense:

‘What am I supposed to do? . . . Change the rules? Do you know how old these rules are? They’re older than me, than you, than this entire place. I didn’t make them, I came and found them here’ (p. 188).

This is followed (as though an attempt to maintain integrity) by a pathetic cataloging of his merits as a patriarchal provider. On this particular occasion he works himself up to such a state that Amalia cautions him to watch his heart, to which he replies, “ ‘To hell with my heart .... To hell with you, the place, Felix—everything’ ” (p. 188).

Frank is driven even further away from achieving a sense of ego integrity by his contradictory position in relation to the land. On the one hand, he has struggled long and unsuccessfully to maintain the land in both the literal and symbolic sense of inheritance; but on the other hand, he must ignore the one figure whose stewardship over the land might restore it. Copper has been making a careful evaluation of the topography and crops with an eye to restoring the soil. But Frank sees no alternative to the law and custom of his milieu. The plantation will go to the “legitimate” line of the family. This means the ascendancy of a niece who has little respect for either family or land and promises to manage affairs with the rapacity of a Snopes. Hence, we see that there has even been a failure of “generativity” with regard to the proper guidance of the niece, while at the same time a curious success, despite a perverse system, with respect to the black nephew. Since Frank is not free to follow Copper as an important “image bearer,” he must also reject that sense of land which idealizes his own identity. Such a contradiction, produced by the culture that conditioned him, moves him much closer to despair than to a final integrity of ego. Indeed: “Despair expresses the feeling that the time is now too short for the attempt to start another life and try out alternate roads to integrity.”

Frank’s tragedy, which is both personal and cultural, encompasses the entire plantation, including those closest to him, especially Amalia and, to an extent, Felix. Since both share the code of conduct Frank is committed to, this is inevitable. But for Amalia it is especially painful, because Copper is her own flesh
and blood and because she loves Frank. One infers the relationship between Frank and Amalia to be a more humane counterpart to that having existed between Frank’s brother and Copper’s mother. Nothing overtly sexual is suggested, but the special quality of it probably accounts for the special consideration Frank wants to pay to Copper out of all of Walter’s illegitimate children. Yet the relationship is a counterpart, for it exists within the same social system and produces similar humiliation and pain. At the very point Frank is paying her the highest tribute—“To me she is only the second woman I’ve had the good fortune of knowing whom I can call a lady”—Frank is reaffirming her caste position, her inferiority (p. 199). Amalia is so tortured by the conflict between the way of life she has accustomed herself to and her responsibilities to Copper that she can only lower her head and cry: “‘My own blood—I want my own blood to leave my house’” (p. 191). Felix comforts her here as he tries to do on all occasions. His loyalty to her and to Frank is unquestionable. Gradually he does make room in his imagination for Copper and what he represents—in Eriksonian terms, an “image bearer.” Able by subtle sarcasm to maintain his own dignity as “a servant,” Felix at one point indicates openly and seriously to Frank that Copper may be a figure of regeneration for them all (p. 177). Still, out of his respect for both Frank and the code they all follow, he cannot go too far in the direction of Copper. He, for example, avoids indicating to Frank whether or not he respects what Copper is doing and, mistakenly, blames Copper for the pain that Amalia is experiencing. Further, he emphasizes how his own short future precludes choice. Hence it is an open question as to how close to integrity or despair Felix himself is at this stage of life. Amalia, however, like Frank, is most certainly a tormented figure.

As though to emphasize the strength of old age after having shown us the tragedy, Gaines completes his cycle of stories with “Just Like a Tree.” To delineate the strength of his central figure, whose character itself represents the fruition of old age, Gaines moves us from the big house back to a setting totally within the black community. Aunt Fe is thoroughly in her element, a gestalt that informs both the title of the story and the ostensible preparation for a move North. She is preparing for another journey, of course, but in her own mental preparation for death the significance of her life is reemphasized.

Aunt Fe is at the center of ten sketches, ten points of view, all bearing upon her life and her preparation to leave. Gaines emphasizes again the importance of relationship between the
generations, the importance of family, and that of the human life cycle as a developing and culminating experience. His first three sketches are, in order, from the point of view of a child, the child’s father, the child’s mother; his last is from the point of view of the child’s grandmother, an age peer and confidant of Aunt Fe. Running through these sketches, and those intervening between first and last, is the idea of change. Aunt Fe, like Lou, the grandmother in the first sketch, cannot herself change as easily as a younger person, let us say, from preferring the ways of a mule to the efficiency of a red tractor, or from preferring her present home to one in the North. But, since she knows, like the tree in the spiritual, that she “will not be moved,” she can accept most of the events and the commotion around her with a surpassing equanimity.

Her ego integrity is complete because she can both defend the dignity of her worldview and can assent to change where it is most vital to her community. This is dramatized by the two sketches immediately before the last. The first is concerned with the experience of Anne-Marie Duvall, descendant of the planter family for whom Aunt Fe has worked for decades. Fulfilling a sense of family obligation, she travels into the “heart of darkness” to present Aunt Fe with a farewell token. Upon seeing this young white woman whom she has cared for and nursed, Aunt Fe makes a major event of receiving her seventy-nine-cent gift: “‘Thank you, my lady... Thank you, ma’am from the bottom of my heart’” (p. 243). This scene, which could have come directly out of any part of the Plantation literary tradition, does not even slightly diminish Aunt Fe’s stature or dignity, for we have seen her described, respected and loved from many angles, and all within her own setting. In other words, there is no danger of this becoming the single dimension of definition, a conformity to stereotype; we already know Aunt Fe’s character and in this encounter, as in the others, she maintains her integrity. The next sketch extends our understanding. The youth, Emmanuel, whose civil rights activities have sparked a terrorist bombing, is blamed by many for having caused the bombing and the necessity of moving Aunt Fe away to safety. Upon entering the scene to pay his respects, he is received by her, however, as though he belongs there almost as much as she herself. His own claim, directed at large, is that “‘With my eyes shut, I can go anywhere in here without bumping into anything. How many of you can do that?’” (p. 246). It was she who told him how his great-grandfather was lynched, and she who advised him in his anger. He has come to complete their connection, to reaffirm his love for
her, and to ask for her benediction, which she gives: "'Good-bye, Emmanuel... God be with you'" (p. 247). The boy leaves quickly and there is silence; there is nothing more to say. His value to the community has been affirmed. Fe is like "a tree planted 'side the water'; she has been nourished by all the elements in her setting and in turn has cared for all within her ken. It remains only for Fe and Lou, her sister in spirit, to say a few words to each other and to join in singing her "'termination' song. With this subtle word, Gaines emphasizes for us that Aunt Fe's Determination for heaven has been also her determination to nourish life. It is fitting, for, in the words of Erikson at the end of his discussion of ego integrity, "healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death."\(^{12}\)

The design is thus complete. Gaines, who has written of black life in the South with a certainty of hand, has evoked numerous scenes from an ecology subtly, and not so subtly, in flux. And he has urged on us the developmental character of human life: movement through stages of a cycle, with all the interdependencies this implies. With regard to scene, the cycle of stories begins and ends within the sanctum of black community life; it is as though in circling the intervening scenes of town and manor the reader must necessarily return to community definitions of value if he is to understand anything at all. This is not to say that black life is insular or unaffected by the surrounding, even penetrating, white society, but that this particular focus is Gaines' primary interest. Here is where we sense the strongest convergence of individual, family and community: a celebration of ordinary black rural life unmatched in fiction since Zora Hurston. The stories, despite an occasional spectacular device, focus on the ordinary events and customs of their characters; hence, Eddie speaking to his neighbor, or Sonny getting his pot, is just as important as the public burning of a car. Similarly, as Gaines leads us out from home life into the wider milieu, he makes his points against an unjust system as much by implied as by direct criticism.\(^{13}\) A mother and son walking the streets hungry and cold form a scene as telling as the direct indictments of Monsieur Bayonne or the college student. The strength of Gaines' criticism is that it always leads us back to the basics of human interdependence, an idea he relates specifically to the human life cycle and the concept of literal or symbolic parenthood. When, for example, an important theme is at work through several stories, as it is in the precarious emergence of male adulthood in stories two, three and four, one sees the issue of "parenthood" dramatized not only within the particular
stories but finds oneself referred back to the importance of nurture in story one and referred forward to the importance of “benediction” in story five. To speak of life cycle is, then, not arbitrarily to impose interpretation but to acknowledge the care Gaines has taken to construct a series of stories, each from a more advanced perspective of age. The culmination is, as suggested, the last story with its exposition of ego integrity, the final achievement of life. With the introduction of Aunt Fe, we arrive truly at the heart of Gaines’ work, for the word “bloodline” applies not only to a specific story or to blood kin; it is a metaphor standing for Gaines’ entire network of implied kinship. In giving us Fe’s symbolic blessing of Emmanuel, whose name means “God with us,” Gaines gives us her acknowledgement of their common ethos. He thus fuses different psychosocial ages of development, the generations, and individual lives and community life. It is the strength of phylogeny.

NOTES


3 Erikson, Childhood, p. 263.
4 Erikson, Childhood, p. 259.
5 Erikson, Childhood, p. 263.
6 Erikson, Childhood, p. 264.
8 The psychological component of Munford’s analysis is especially important in clarifying for Procter the relation between his behavior, his self-image and the larger society; in so many words, he points to what numerous observers, including psychoanalysts, have noted, “that the oppressor has a vested
interest in the negative identity of the oppressed.” See Erikson, *Youth*, p. 304.

9 Erikson, *Childhood*, p. 268.

10 Erikson, *Childhood*, p. 268.

11 Erikson, *Childhood*, p. 269.

12 Erikson, *Childhood*, p. 269.


14 The stories are not in the order originally written. Gaines’ own words on this are: “I definitely arranged these stories because there is growth.” See O’Brien, p. 91.
are developed and sharply conveyed to the reader through the mind of a black youth who finds himself in prison.

Nineteen is a dangerous age for young black males within this milieu, and Procter Lewis is no exception; it is also a transitional age of passage from adolescence to young adulthood. Procter, an uneducated field worker, unlike the college student in the dentist's office, is not articulate against injustice. But, like him or any black man, he passes through the rituals of a commonly oppressive system, viewed as a category and finding himself rendered frequently "invisible," as was the case when he first entered the police office: "They looked at me, but when they saw I was just a nigger they went back to talking like I wasn't even there" (p. 121). Gaines also delineates the perils of visibility, as Procter, who has come into the police office to give himself up for a crime, finds that he has presumed too much in the act of producing the identification he was asked for: "I wasn't supposed to get any papers out, myself, I was supposed to give him the wallet and let him take what he wanted" (p. 122). Like many another young black man of the place and time that Gaines describes, and the times and places of countless black writers, Procter knows that his safety depends upon observing a very strict caste protocol: "You had to weigh every word...said to you. Sometimes you answered, and other times you kept your mouth shut" (p. 122). Like the young college student, or for that matter like the Biggers Richard Wright knew, Procter is rebellious. The problem is that Procter's mind has been conditioned by an oppressive social situation and his energies confined to a circuit of peer-destruction which ultimately becomes self-destruction. Procter, an adolescent who has been in and out of jail several times, is well on his way to making it a "career," an ironic commentary on the life issue that typifies this fifth stage, that of adolescent psychosocial development: identity and the consideration of career prototypes.

Fortunately, like Malcolm X, Procter finds in prison an instructive threshold to a new stage of growth. But before he can successfully cross over he must become aware of himself, of who he is; that is, on one level he must recognize the destructiveness of his behavior and on another level how unsatisfying it is to him deep in his psyche. The increasingly destructive fights he is becoming habituated to are frequently over issues he does not really care about. For example, eventually he comes to recognize that he really does not love any of the various women who have seemed so irresistible and worth fighting for. As he says, "Maybe I ain't never loved nobody. Maybe I ain't never loved nobody
since my mama died. Because I loved her, I know I loved her. But
the rest—no, I never loved the rest” (p. 149). And he knows the
fault is not totally his, for he recognizes “They don’t let me love
them. Some kind of way they keep you from loving them . . . .” (p. 
149). Part of the origin of his deep sense of rejection, and con-
sequent habit of rejecting, appears to lie in his family history.
After his mother died, there was no one to take her place; family
members are described as “scattered around,” his father in parts
unknown, “somewhere up North.” Neither neighbors nor family
appear to have been able to provide “those concentric rings of
social support” that are apparent in “A Long Day in November.”
His affiliation with Grinning Boy and his liaisons with assorted
women are the best Procter has been able to do with his
adolescence, a growth phase in which one tends to be in a
developmental moratorium—that is, a time “between the
morality learned by the child and the ethics to be developed by
the adult.”\(^6\) That phase of psychosocial development into which
Procter must move (according to Erikson, the sixth) involves
intimacy versus isolation. If the capacity for intimacy is not
achieved, then, what Erikson calls “distantiation” will prevail,
that is, “the readiness to isolate and if necessary to destroy those
forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one’s
own . . . .”\(^6\) This tendency would appear to characterize perfectly
Munford, the hardbitten, perpetual brawler with whom Procter
shares a few hours of cell time. But Munford, a sixty-year-old
man, is an unlikely surrogate parent only at first glance; after so
many failures in previous stages of life, in this stage, the seventh
(that of generativity versus stagnation), he is anxious to help
guide someone of a younger generation.

Relating his own experiences of forty-years in and out of jail for
behavior similar to Procter’s, Munford becomes the catalyst
Procter needs. In compelling terms and totally without self-
righteous lecturing, he explains to Procter the nature of the social
and economic system that is oppressing them both. Explaining
the hidden danger of letting a white plantation owner arrange for
his release for the “unimportant” crime of killing just another
black man, Munford predicts:

‘Yeah, he’ll come and take you back. And next year you’ll kill another old
nigger. ‘Cause they grow niggers just to be killed and they grow people
like you to kill ’em. That’s all part of the—the culture and every man got to
play his part in the culture, or the culture don’t go on’ (p. 142).

He seems to be admonishing Procter to heed the prison in-
junction, “Wake Up Dead Man.”\(^7\) We know that Procter does
begin to think and, painfully, does come to self-recognition. He