ERNEST GAINES

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Chapter Six
Identity and Integrity in
In My Father’s House

You must stand individually . . . to stand with the crowd.
—Ernest Gaines

Past and present interact constantly in the fiction of Ernest Gaines as characters try to reconcile knowledge of the past with their present existence. Being aware of and at ease with the past is vital to understanding the present and surviving in the future. What makes Jane Pittman the leader her people so desperately seek is her embodiment of folk history. In his second-to-last novel Gaines continues probing the relationship of past reconciliation and future leadership touched upon in Jane’s saga. Through the character Phillip Martin, he examines the relationship between past knowledge, present experience, and future leadership.

When In My Father’s House opens, the Reverend Phillip Martin is a respected minister and civil rights leader. He is reminiscent of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., as the allusion in his name implies, and Phillip has a long, successful history of nonviolent civil rights protests. The community he has piloted is now in transition, however, and its younger members, many of them teachers, are disillusioned with his approach to effecting change. They, like earlier Gaines characters, such as Jackson Bradley and Jimmy Aaron, possess a cynicism resulting from their education, and they no longer have faith in the leadership of Phillip Martin and older, church-oriented members of the grass-roots movement.

To weather generational divisiveness and enact fundamental changes that will secure his community’s future, Phillip needs uncommon forbearance, and for inspiration he draws upon his memory of the successful protests he has mounted. Recalling past triumphs strengthens his resolve, but at this crucial crossroads Phillip is forced to confront a less pleasant memory. While he struggles to maintain his stature of community leader by generating enthusiasm for an economic boycott, Phillip must also struggle with a portion of the past he has denied, the son he deserted, Robert X.
The arrival of Robert X is shrouded in mystery. His cryptic presence is implied by the unknown variable he takes for his surname, a ritual practiced by the Black Muslims who follow Elijah Muhammad. Refusing to keep the names given to their ancestors by slaveholders but having no knowledge as to what names should properly replace them, the Black Muslims employ the letter X as a constant reminder of the uncertainty of familial identity bred by slavery. The Black Muslims believe that to accept the family names given by enslavers is also to accept an identity embodying dehumanization and debasement. The severing of familial ties exemplified in the Black Muslim naming tradition becomes a fitting symbol for Gaines as he addresses what he acknowledges is a constant motif, the search of sons for fathers: "In my books there always seem to be fathers and sons searching for each other. That’s a theme I’ve worked with since I started writing. Even when the father was not in the story, I’ve dealt with his absence and its effects on his children" (Desruisseaux, 13). Whether it is Copper Laurent or Robert X seeking to rightfully be acknowledged, the psychic state of Gaines’s male characters is a direct result of paternal presence or absence. The effect of Phillip’s desertion on Robert, together with Robert’s subsequent decision to force Phillip into a realization of the consequences of his past actions, creates an arena for the interaction of past and present within the novel. Paternal lineage evolves into a symbol of continuity representing the search for past meaning to make sense of present existence.

Robert searches for familial continuity as represented through the ideal of a father. In keeping with the distance he perceives between his self-awareness and his given name, he calls himself Robert, which is not his true name; drops his surname; and adopts the unknown quantity. As Phillip’s firstborn, he keenly feels that the family name Martin should have defined his identity, but when Phillip’s desertion forces a redefinition of his identity and his present existence, the name becomes meaningless and he assumes an alias. He knows who his father is, but Phillip’s abandonment and the subsequent family tragedy to which it leads create a past that Robert cannot accept, a past that emasculates and dehumanizes him. Since Phillip provides him with no true familial identification, to maintain his name would be to perpetuate a past that he sees as a hoax and desperately seeks to exorcise. Robert enters the novel as a mysterious presence with no history, no identity, and no epithet. For the majority of the work he remains nameless, referred to mostly as “Virginia’s tenant.”

With an X for his last name, Robert, like his father, becomes an allusion to a prominent political figure, one in sharp contrast to Martin Luther King. His name suggests Malcolm X, and about Malcolm, Gaines says the follow-
ing: “Some critics have said that this is one of the things that Malcolm could have taught us that you go through hell but come out a whole man. I think that I was trying to get some of that into my literature before I had read Malcolm” (Beauford, 17). Unfortunately, Robert X is never given the opportunity to attain the regenerative wholeness Gaines sees represented in Malcolm X; instead, he remains psychologically fragmented, ultimately taking his own life. The conjuring of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X is further appropriate to Gaines’s theme because the two can be viewed as a symbolic father-son representing generational differences in the civil rights movement and the many generational conflicts in the novel.

The extremes epitomized by Phillip and Robert are foreshadowed early in the novel through their vastly different introductions. Virginia Colar is the owner of the boardinghouse Robert selects as his residence when he arrives in the small city of St. Adrienne in search of Phillip. A sensitive and perceptive woman, Virginia is filled with foreboding by Robert’s aspect, and she describes him in the following manner: “She didn’t like his looks. He was too thin, too hungry-looking. She didn’t like the little twisted knots of hair on his face that passed for a beard. He looked sick. His jaws were too sunken-in for someone his age. His bloodshot eyes wandered too much. . . . He definitely looked like somebody who had been shut in.” Robert’s introductory description differs sharply from that given of his father: “Phillip Marrin wore a black pinstriped suit, a light gray shirt, and a red polka-dot tie. He was sixty years old, just over six feet tall, and he weighed around two hundred pounds. His thick black hair and thick well-trimmed mustache were just beginning to show some gray. Phillip was a very handsome dark-brown-skinned man, admired by women, black and white. . . . He was very much respected by most of the people who knew him” (FH, 34). Phillip possesses a vitality that Robert does not. He enjoys an anchored position in his community, as evidenced by the name of the church of which he is pastor, the Solid Rock Baptist Church. The legacy he bequeaths Robert, however, is one of instability that renders Robert an outcast, tormented by a past lacking the identification a paternal lineage represents. Robert’s psychic fragmentation causes him to return to St. Adrienne and aimlessly walk the street. His rambling brings him into contact with others, and his pitiable, silent presence forces their self-examination and in Phillip’s case forces the exposure of self-deception. The juxtapositioning of this father and son establishes the larger thematic antagonisms of the story: youth and age, conservatism and radicalism, known and unknown, urban and rural, private and public, and most importantly, past and present. Through these oppositions Gaines makes a broader statement about the re-
lationship between past and present, identity and integrity. If the significance of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is that knowledge of the past is vital to shaping future action, then the significance of *In My Father’s House* is that acknowledgment of the past is integral to ensuring future meaning.

*In My Father’s House* represents a departure from many of Gaines’s trademarks. The tradition of oral storytelling, the setting of the plantation, and the use of voice that play such vital roles in the rest of his canon are modulated here. He is less concerned with realistically recreating a time, a place, or a memorial to a particular cultural past than he is with exploring a concept with many general implications, the relationship of past and present as both affect identity. The lush naturalistic images of Louisiana found in *Catherine Carmier* are replaced by extensive descriptions of internal psychological terrain. First-person narratives are replaced by an omniscient narrative because Gaines feels it is the only appropriate voice for Phillip’s story: “[C]ertain books require that you write not from the first person but from the omniscient point of view. *In My Father’s House* is just such a book. You cannot tell that story from the minister’s point of view because the minister keeps too much inside him. He does not reveal it—he won’t reveal it to anybody. . . . So the story has to be told from that omniscient point of view” (Rowell, 41-42).

Continuing to probe the relationship of leadership and individual identity as he did in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, and returning to the quest motif of *Bloodline*, Gaines investigates the past’s role in the creation of character, while at the same time exploring the relationship of a father and his son. Phillip Martin is a leader, but the novel seems to query how a man who 22 years earlier forsook the role of leadership within his own family can accept the mantle of leadership in the present. Throughout the work, Phillip must reevaluate social conscience in light of personal conscience, and he undertakes a journey that obliges him to recognize his past in order to salvage his future.

The impetus for Phillip’s odyssey begins in his living room as members of the black community gather to debate the effectiveness of various strategies of protest. Primarily they are considering the necessity of white participation to the success of their movement for civil rights. At this point Phillip is a conciliating force, harmonizing the polar factions of the progressive and conservative elements in the community. His placidity is upset, however, when in the midst of the gathering he sees his eldest son. He does not completely remember him, but an intuitive shock of recognition leaves him paralyzed. His inability to act and his inability to acknowledge Robert lay the
foundation for the collapse of his power as a black leader, and the eventual erosion of his influence is depicted through his needing physical support from the two whites present at the gathering:

He looked puzzled, confused, a deep furrow came into his forehead, and he raised his hand up to his temple as if he were in pain. . . . He pushed his way out of the crowd and started across the room. He had taken only two or three steps when he suddenly staggered and fell heavily to the floor.

The pharmacist, Octave Bacheron . . . knelt on the other side of him, put his small white hand on Phillip’s chest and told him to lie still a moment. . . . Octave Bacheron nodded to Anthony to help him get Phillip to his feet. . . . Phillip told them again that he was all right and he could stand on his own. But the two white men insisted on helping him to his feet, and they made him lean on them. (FH, 39-42).

The image of the fallen civil rights leader, now propped by two white men, vividly conveys Phillip’s diminished stature as a leader and sets the stage for the depiction of his diminished stature as a father, and hence as a man. His collapse in his living room starts him on a journey to his past and subsequently to the acknowledgment of those aspects of his identity he has denied. The voyage through his history is an arduous one and begins with deep introspection within the darkened quiet of his study, where he goes for solace after his encounter with Robert.

Phillip’s study reflects the values that have formed the nucleus of his political philosophy. His integrationist ideology is symbolized in the pastiches that decorate the walls of his office: “On the left was a collage of President John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. In another frame hanging evenly with the first was another collage of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington” (FH, 52). In the content of the two pictures an evolution from past to present is evident. It is also interesting to note that King, like Phillip in the earlier scene in his living room, is in the presence of two whites who seek to contribute to the cause of civil rights. When contrasted to the collage in which two early black leaders, Douglass and Washington, are joined with Lincoln, the pastiche of later figures might imply a dilution of black power caused by an increasing white presence and signify the dilution more radical members within Phillip’s organization fear.

For Phillip, however, the collages and their placement have no negative meaning or import. They reflect both his belief in the power of integration and his belief that a society representing an amalgam of distinct races
ensures progress for all. To him they evoke a sense of timelessness, as those who worked for racial coexistence in the past are poised with those who work for it in the present. As they hang "evenly" in his study, they indicate no tension between past and present and are representations of the steady progression Phillip has enjoyed while forging his public identity. The symbolic harmony of past and present contained in his choice of collages is not displayed in his own life, however, and the continuity of his identity is now threatened by Robert's presence. He has acknowledged his political history and its place in his public present, but he must now acknowledge his personal history and its place in his private future.

It falls to Phillip to reexamine his motives and values and attempt to reconnect with his past, just as he must reconnect with his son. He has denied his personal history by running from it and has run so far that reconstruction of his prior life becomes difficult. As he endeavors to recall the details of the family he deserted, he cannot, and even the most important and concrete details surrounding them, in particular the details of his eldest son, remain nebulous: "He had been sitting there the last few minutes thinking about his son. He knew Robert was not his name. And he had been sitting there trying to think of his true name" (FH, 62). Forgetting his son's name indicates the great effort Phillip has expended in divorcing his present identity from the actions of his past. But as Robert's appearance reminds him, the present is a consequence of the past and the past will always be a specter.

The increasing self-examination forced by the apparition of his prior life makes Phillip aware of the "two" Phillip Martins. The collision of conflicting identities torments him until he commits a desperate and selfish act. When Robert is arrested for vagrancy, Phillip's guilt compels him to bail him out and compromise the integrity not only of his position as a leader but also of the upcoming protest his community plans. His attempt to redress the wrongs he committed prior to becoming a minister leads him to enter into questionable negotiation with the town's sheriff, Nolan, and new transgressions compound the old.

Nolan's and Martin's social roles have placed them at ideological odds with each other, but in spite of their opposing positions, Nolan holds a grudging respect for what Phillip has stood for and what he has accomplished. Phillip sullies this respect, however, when he enters into a pact in which Nolan agrees to free Robert from jail and keep the secret of his paternity. In return, Phillip contracts to restrain his community from launching the demonstration they had planned. This new secret solves nothing and only obscures Phillip's route to his sense of self. He pays a high price for his guilt—a loss of self-respect and the loss of his position as leader.
Nolan says at the close of their dealings, in reference to both Phillip’s compromising and his desertion, “I always thought you was different. . . . Just go to show how wrong a man can be” (FH, 92). Phillip’s diminished prestige is accompanied by a diminished self-esteem, and both are manifested through a loss of standing in the community. His followers view him as having bargained with the devil, and disempower him, for no one person’s interests can be greater than those of the larger community’s. As one member of the committee organizing the upcoming protest tells Phillip, “I want [my son] . . . out of that jail right now. But I know I don’t have no right to ask the people to sacrifice everything for him. No one person can come before the cause, Reverend. Not even you” (FH, 122). Ironically, his community’s stripping him of his public identity frees Phillip to pursue a private identity imprisoned in the past.

Phillip’s divorce from his people isolates him, and his detachment is represented through the running image of a solitary pecan tree. Upon first describing the tree he refers to it as “leafless,” indicating his own barrenness, as he now stands rooted in the community but lacking the branches and leaves that represent familial extensions to his son, Robert. Later, after he is unable to tell his present wife, Alma; his friends; or his associates about Robert, he describes the pecan tree in a manner that indicates the seclusion and social coldness he feels while singly bearing the secret of his son: “The lawn was white with frost. The pecan tree in the open pasture across the street stood bare and alone” (FH, 68). To rejoin the fold of family and community, Phillip must find a way of making his past consistent with his present.

His first step in reconciling his opposing personas is to stop running from his former existence. Every decision he has made in his life was made in the shadow of his past, even his decision to choose the ministry as a vocation. As he tells an old friend, “I went to religion to forget it. I prayed and prayed to forget it. I tried to wipe out everything in my past, make my mind blank, start all over. I thought the good work I was doing with the church, with the people, would make up for all the things I had done in the past. Till one day I looked cross my living room. . . . From the moment I saw him in that house—I fell . . . I fell” (FH, 201). Phillip’s attempts to redeem past transgressions through virtue and contrition dissipate with the advent of his son. The memory of his desertion will not allow him to find comfort in his deeds, and Robert does not allow him to exonerate himself through his religion.

Robert reminds his father that no amount of sorrow, regret, or religious purging can atone for the abandonment of family and disavowal of personal history. His mordant comments bitterly point out the irony of a man who
has destroyed the souls of his family now making his lifework the saving of souls: "The man told Mama . . . you had found God, and you was down here saving souls. Mama thought it was the funniest thing she ever heard. . . . After you had destroyed us, you down here saving souls" (FH, 100). Robert's revelation of the hypocrisy inherent in Phillip's conception of himself renders hollow any rationale Phillip might offer, but Phillip does offer an apology for himself, and ironically he turns to the past—the larger African-American cultural past, that is—to assist him.

As he examines his conscience, Phillip is powerless to find personal extenuation. Because he can conceive of no circumstances in his life adequate to absolve him of his guilt, he attempts to construct a historical explanation for his actions. As he speaks to Robert, he endeavors to create a context for his behavior, but the emptiness of his explanations becomes obvious and serves only to accentuate Phillip's lack of responsibility more conspicuously: "I had a mouth, but I didn't have a voice. . . . I had arms, but I couldn't lift them up to you. It took a man to do these things, and I wasn't a man. I was just some other brutish animal who could cheat, steal, rob, kill—but not stand. Not be responsible. Not protect you or your mother. They had branded that in us from the time of slavery" (FH, 102). It is too convenient for Phillip, a man who runs from his past, to seek refuge in his people's cultural past to justify his selfish actions. His rationale ironically becomes, to borrow Sartre's terminology, "bad faith" as insincere as that of earlier Gaines characters who use history to justify their moral wrongs. Remembering the explanation given by the uncle in the short story "Bloodline," Frank Laurent, who denies his nephew, Copper, his legacy because of his black heritage, we remember a white man who blames history for racial wrongs and insists that because he is merely one man, a victim of a monolithic system impervious to transformation, he cannot effect change. Phillip's apology is similar, as he joins the characters who prefer the path of least personal accountability, using history to justify the mistakes of individuals. The conception of history that Phillip relies upon in formulating excuses is in sharp contrast to the vision of history generally expressed in Gaines's canon. For Phillip, it is not the vivid, personal, oral history that such characters as Jane Pittman use to actualize themselves; it is an empty justifier, an abstract concept used to shift personal responsibility for actions from "I" to "they."

Phillip's fragile self-image is based on illusion. To strengthen his conception of himself, he must rediscover the elements that compose his identity. His first step in his unearthing of self is to realize he can offer no adequate explanation for his actions and to cease running from his past. Since he can imagine no way to reconnect with the events that have made him the man
he is, other than actually to seek out those people who have knowledge of
him in another time, gropingly, awkwardly, and with no clear plan he re-
turns to the Reno plantation where he grew up. This is the only portion of
the novel that unfolds in the rural setting omnipresent in Gaines's other
works. Using this site as the locale for Phillip's regeneration implies that his
truth cannot be found in the urban community in which he now lives but
must instead be sought in his rural parish with the communal memory that
connects him to the past. Appropriately, the information guiding him to
sources that aid in self-reconciliation comes from a figure we have seen in
many of Gaines's works in the persons of Aunt Clo, Aunt Fe, and Jane
Pittman. Each of these women is an icon of the past, and Phillip's god-
mother, Angelina Bouie, is modeled in the same fashion. She is oracle, guid-
ing him to knowledge of his personal history.

As Phillip returns to the house of his "nanane," he returns to a world
more familiar to Gaines's readers than the city of St. Adrienne. The quarters
of Reno plantation are peopled with characters resembling those in
Catherine Carmier and Of Love and Dust. Just as Madame Bayonne can see
the soul of Jackson Bradley in his eyes, and just as Jim Kelly can see
Marcus's defiance in his aspect, so too can Phillip's godmother, a "small,
very old woman," regard him and know "there was something wrong in St.
Adrienne" (FH, 111). She gives him sympathy, but more importantly, she
gives him the intelligence that tells him where his journey to his past should
begin. Angelina informs Phillip that his boyhood friend, Chippo Simon,
has seen Robert's mother, Johanna. Because he believes Chippo might be
able to furnish him with the information he seeks, Phillip becomes obsessed
with finding Chippo. Looking for his former consort takes him back to the
parish where he grew up, and each person he encounters serves to move him
further from his present identity as minister and leader, and closer to his
past.

His first significant encounter is with a self-styled "reverend," the Rever-
end Peters, a man in his seventies or eighties whose appearance reflects
Phillip's perception of himself after his "fall": "The man looked very tired,
his eyes watery and bloodshot" (FH, 151). In the aged man's weary aspect
and in the sham of spiritual leadership he proffers, Phillip sees a manifest-
ation of a psychological existence too close to his own. No longer is he "Reverend
Martin," a genuine man of the cloth; he is now a pretender, a parody of a re-
ligious symbol. The more Phillip's self-contempt increases, the more he sees
himself in Peters. In one instance when he can no longer abide the homilies
Peters offers, Phillip equates Peters's ineffectual religious platitudes with his
own teachings. Peters attempts to instill in Phillip belief in future success,
but Phillip paradoxically adopts the cynicism of the younger members of his own congregation. In response to Reverend Peters's soothing remarks that all will work out “if you have faith,” Phillip’s reply, “There’s a gap between us and our sons . . . that even He . . . can’t seem to close” (FH, 154), dismisses as a simple placebo the faith he has spent his life encouraging. His harsh confrontation with personal truth has rendered him unable to believe in the machinations of a larger deity and has further distanced him from his calling as spiritual leader. The further Phillip moves from his identity as religious leader and upright citizen, the closer he comes to a coexistence with those very elements in his community from which he was so removed.

A second encounter with a young man of Robert’s age, Billy, moves Phillip closer to an understanding of his son’s anger. The relationship that Billy and his father share strikes a chord of cognizance in Phillip, and he uses Billy as a sounding board while he gropes to find the words that can explain his actions to his own son. Billy does not reveal the sympathy for fathers that Phillip hopes to find; instead, he tells Phillip, “My daddy got to catch up with me. . . . I can’t go back where he’s at” (FH, 166), and makes Phillip realize that as a father, he must be responsible for reconstructing the bond with his son. Phillip is at a loss as to how to do so, however, and seeks guidance from Billy:

“How do we close the gap, Billy?”

“I don’t know,” Billy said.

“The church?”

“Shit,” Billy said, without hesitating a moment. “There ain’t nothing in them churches, Pops, but more separation. Every little church got they own little crowd, like gangs out on the street. They all got to outdo the other one. Don’t look for that crowd to close no gap.”

“The whole civil rights program started in the church.”

“Just because I can eat at the white folks’ counter with my daddy, just because I can ride side him in the front of the bus don’t mean we any closer,” Billy said. (FH, 166)

In a single conversation Billy undercuts the two most important aspects of Phillip’s identity, his role as a minister and his role as a civil rights leader. Billy’s assessment renders both roles futile and intimates that more than political activism or religious ritual is needed to close the fissure between fathers and sons. His comments reiterate the novel’s theme that personal bonds must be secure before social ones can be formed.

In looking at the rupture between Billy and his father, Phillip sees him-
self and Robert, and by extension, his generation and the next. His realization forces a reevaluation of his role as a religious and political leader, evident in subsequent reflections: "He was still thinking about Billy, comparing him to his own son in St. Adrienne. They were about the same age, and they were saying practically the same thing. There were probably many others just like them. He saw it in some of the younger schoolteachers in St. Adrienne. They could not say in public the things that Billy and his son could say, but by their actions they showed that they felt the same way about God, Law, and Country. He asked himself how would he ever reach them—could he ever reach them?" (FH, 170). Phillip's despair over the gaping breach between him and Robert echoes Gaines's own pondering as to how the chasm between fathers and sons can be closed: "I don't know what it will take to bring them together again. I don't know that the Christian religion will bring fathers and sons together again. I don't know that the father will ever be in a position—a political position or any position of authority—from which he can reach out and bring his son back to him again" (Rowell, 40).

As Gaines alludes to the position of authority and political power from which a black father might regain his son, he evokes Phillip's situation as minister, leader, and father. Even from his social vantage point, Phillip cannot reach Robert and continues a process of soul-searching to discover what obstacles prevent him from doing so. In his retrospection, every question Phillip ponders in relation to his public identity has a direct impact on his private one. By examining his ability to lead the young, for example, he is actually querying his identity as a father and family leader. His continuing self-scrutiny makes his awareness of a dual existence even more acute, and a veil of remorse obscures the minister in St. Adrienne from the view of the man in Reno plantation.

Paralleling Phillip's movement away from his St. Adrienne identity is a movement toward persons farther in his past, those more closely affiliated with the existence he sought to escape. In his pursuit of Chippo, he finds himself searching bars and gambling houses, places that worship far different ideals from those worshiped in the Solid Rock Baptist Church. From the self-styled Reverend Peters to Billy and now to a former flame, Adeline Toussaint, Phillip has followed a downward spiral from minister to father to carnal man. Adeline reminds Phillip of the side of him he wants to forget, and seeing her brings back desires he would rather disregard, but cannot, as he notices, "She was a very handsome woman, with high cheekbones, large dark-brown eyes, and full lips. . . . She and Phillip had been lovers once. A sudden warm good feeling came over him that he wished was
not there" *(FH, 174)*. He feels a passion for Adeline that he does not feel for his wife, Alma, a passion that reminds him of his life "before religion." His conversation with her contributes another dimension to his self-understanding, and for a moment he experiences the hurt selfish acts of desire can cause when Adeline hints that she may have pretended a love that was not there:

"But you did love once?"
"Did I?"
"You said so."
She laughed. "Stop it, Phillip Martin."
He was hurt. "Well?"

"How many times that's been said by both man and woman? How many times you yourself have said that to a woman? You meant it every time?" *(FH, 177)*

Adeline’s responses force Phillip into a position similar to the one he has placed women in but has seldom been placed in himself. Her confession to an innocuous duplicity magnifies the more tragic consequences of his own duplicity as he denied his past to live in the illusion of his present.

Phillip’s encounter with Reverend Peters forces him to evaluate his validity as a minister; his conversation with Billy compels him to acknowledge the irrelevancy of his religious and political ideologies to an upcoming generation; and his meeting with Adeline forces him to admit to the guile that governed his relationships with women. None of these realizations have been easy for Phillip, but the most difficult encounter, his encounter with Chippo, still awaits him. Fatigued from his burden of self-truths, he tells Adeline, "I’m very tired. But I have to find Chippo" *(FH, 178)*, and resolves to uncover the final key to his past.

The Phillip that ultimately does see Chippo is a very different one from the minister and civil rights leader in the beginning of the novel. He is a Phillip who remembers that Robert "was not his only child out of wedlock. He had children that he knew of by three or four other women. And he had been as proud of it as any other man" *(FH, 150)*. He is a Phillip who recalls the following experience: "Talking to a newspaper man—a man who’s covered executions all over the South. . . . Most of them, black men. Said he never heard one called Daddy’s name at that last hour. Heard mama called, gran’mon, nanane—Jesus, God. Not one time he heard daddy called" *(FH, 153)*. He is a Phillip who, looking at Chippo "with bloodshot eyes . . . tired and worried" *(FH, 181)*, is closer in appearance to the opening physical description of his son, Robert X.
Chippo Simon is Phillip's alter ego. He is the embodiment of the desires Phillip has kept hidden, the other side of Phillip's public personality, what Phillip would be had he not found religion: a "tall, slim, but solidly built man in his early sixties. His long, narrow face was the color of dark, well-used leather, and it looked just as tough. . . . He looked like a person who did not worry much; he would take life as it came" (FH, 180). Chippo has dissipated himself with liquor, women, and bad debts, and in the course of his life has come upon the truths Phillip needs to unify his two identities. It is Chippo who can tell Phillip the true name of Robert X, Etienne, and the name of his other two children by Johanna, Antoine and Justine. It is also Chippo who can tell him of his other family's tragedy and his eldest son's psychological disintegration. Chippo reveals to Phillip that Robert's ranging began prior to his arrival at St. Adrienne and that in seeking his father he seeks an unformed retribution: "At night he went out walking. The people saw him. Then back to the house—to the room—laying there woke, listening, waiting. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting for what? Another chance? He had failed his sister. What was he waiting for—to defend mama? That's why he lay there waiting? What other reason?" (FH, 199). Chippo's revelation of the fate of Phillip's family is a weighty one, and "where Grippo's mind had been relieved of a burden by talking about it, Phillip now felt a heavier burden by hearing it" (FH, 200). The saga causes an implosion of thought in Phillip's mind. He retraces his life, particularly the recent events that led to this point, and realizes he is as powerless to reach Robert now as he was when he first encountered him in his living room. When Alma, Phillip's wife, and Shepherd, one of the teachers in Phillip's congregation, arrive at Chippo's after searching for Phillip with the news of the fate that has befallen Robert, Phillip's implosion of thought turns into an explosion of frustrated violence. He takes random blows at Chippo, at Shepherd, then turns from them, "looking for something to hit, something to break. But there was nothing near him. The walls were too far for him to reach" (FH, 207). Wishing to strike out at his past to eradicate it, he cannot. Like the walls that surround him, it is "too far for him to reach." Phillip cannot make amends for the past but must find a way to place it in a new perspective. With the help of Chippo, who tells him, "You can't stop man. . . . We need you out there too much. . . . I need somebody to look up to" (FH, 208), he begins to revise his identity as man, minister, and leader. By articulating his need for someone to look up to, Chippo replaces the fallen Phillip in a position of leadership, but it is leadership encompassing a different meaning. As he exists for Chippo, Phillip is no longer a trailblazer whose effectiveness is intertwined with untarnished prominence. He
is a leader because he has human frailties, can overcome these frailties, and can emerge as a stronger individual. Reconciling himself to Chippo’s vision, Phillip reconnects himself to those he has forgotten and now has the potential to be a more appropriate leader, one firmly rooted in his past. Like Jane Pittman, by living example he can become an effectual guide.

Phillip’s past victories are also placed in a different context when he realizes that his past identity is not separate from but an integral part of his present identity. Another teacher in the room, Beverly Ricord, helps Phillip see that all along, his running away from his past has constituted a tacit recognition of its existence and that this recognition has been the impetus motivating him to action for the good of all. Recalling his protest to gain his people access to the legal system, Beverly states, “There’re many more people who walk up to that courthouse today without trembling. I go up there today without trembling. Shepherd go up there today without trembling. I take my class there, and they walk all through that courthouse without trembling. Your son Patrick is in my class. He’s one of the proudest little boys you’ll ever meet. Why? Because Daddy made all this possible” (FH, 212). Phillip’s gaining tangible entry to the courthouse is now complemented by his gaining spiritual access to a new understanding of what he has done and why. No longer does he conceive of his achievements in large, abstract, and public terms; he now sees them as the very concrete improvements to daily black life that they are. Redefining his role as a leader moves him to a subsequent reconsideration of his role as a father. Though he has failed Robert and his other children, he has been a good father to his current family, and with Beverly’s help Phillip can view Patrick as the reincarnation of his lost son, Robert. Through Patrick, Phillip has a chance to do what he could not do with his firstborn, construct a concrete father-son relationship.

Phillip’s remarks to his wife, Alma, reveal a floundering man weary of introspection and at the beginning of another odyssey, this one not to rediscover the past but to discover the future:

“I’m lost, Alma. I’m lost.”

“Shhh,” she said. “Shhh. Shhh. We just go’n have to start again.” (FH, 214)

Start again is what Phillip must do to create a new, more complete, and accurate identity.

The rifts between Phillip and Robert, between Billy and his father, between the younger members of the church and the older have a common cause, lack of faith in the past. For Ernest Gaines, belief in the self is important, but integral to such belief is acceptance of the past. He modifies the
adage "A man who forgets his past is bound to repeat it" to "A man should not forget his past but be bound to it." Phillip cannot run from his past, for it defines him. Any subsequent structure he builds in his life—whether the structure of a new family or the structure of social leadership—must securely rest on his past. His odyssey toward personal responsibility strengthens his integrity, and he sees that social impact is meaningful only as long as it can be measured in terms of individual and familial benefit. More important than political strides are individuals secure in themselves making personal strides toward their own dignity and not willing, as was Phillip Martin, to compromise that dignity.

The journeys to self-esteem begun by the boys Sonny and James, continued by the young men Jackson and Marcus, and culminating in the epic life of Jane Pittman are all woven into Phillip's search for dignity. His manhood and the respect that comes with it can only be realized when he grasps that private responsibility must be the necessary precursor to social responsibility.