Spiritual Deprivation and the Legacy of Black Fathers

This critical examination is part of a larger, textbook-length work whose aim is to explore what an African-centered or Afrocentric examination of African American literature yields beyond the possibilities of other less culturally centered literary approaches. To be sure, criticism of Black writers and accompanying literary productions abounds, yet most approaches—including many of those employed by Black critics—still rest upon Eurocentered criteria to assess the value and merit of a work which stands upon African-centered ground. Put differently, many literary critics still explore Black literature through the bluest of eyes; consequently, conclusions are drawn and assertions made about various works that often do not reflect their function in or contribution to African American life or literary traditions. Fortunately, however, the cry for African-centered literary analyses is finally being heard. Culturally centered concepts such as “Signifyin” (Gates, 1990) and “coolness” (Majors and Billson, 1993) are now being used as analytical tools by which to comprehend more completely the complex ideological, spiritual, and social commentary Black writers have attempted to offer for years.

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This article seeks first to establish an African-centered or Afrocentric framework through which to examine the question of spirit and spiritual awareness in African American literature. More specifically, it aims to expose the relational deficiencies between Black fathers and sons when a spiritual connection does not exist. Ernest Gaines’ In My Father’s House (1978) and John Edgar Wideman’s The Lynchers (1973) serve as primary texts for this analysis. The second half of the article explores what happens to Black sons who desperately seek the approval or affirmation of a Black father who does not love himself and who is not spiritually empowered. It examines what becomes of these sons and how they cope with their father’s ineptitude. This analysis also encourages readers to read Black fiction for insight and solutions to the African American social dilemma.
By way of "Afrocentric analysis," this writer does not strive simply to describe a writer or a work as being Afrocentric (see Asante, 1990). Rather, the more profitable aim is to place a work within an African-centered cosmological framework and then to explore the extent to which it reflects the values/principles subscribed by an African worldview. Certainly such a African worldview is complex and not to be fully grasped in any one definition. Yet, for the purposes of this examination, I submit that elder/ancestor reverence, the primacy of the naming tradition, the privileging of the community above one's individual self, and the use of ritual to guide all life events are four important characteristics of an African-centered space. However, the most fundamental characteristic found in African cosmology is the primacy of spirit (Ani, 1989). By spirit, I mean the extent to which one seeks balance and harmony with self, others, and the universe. This is most often achieved via one's knowledge of his own history and a resulting connection to that past. The lack of such self-knowledge usually results in one's inability to determine his own self-worth and, consequently, the power of his spirit within. In *Metu Neter*, Ra Un Nefer Amen (1990) posits that an African cosmology

provides an ordered and unified (synthetical) view of who and what is God, Man, and the forces that administrate and sustain the world. No understanding of a subject can take place without an ordered and unified presentation of its whole and parts. Secondly, cosmology provides a framework that guides thinking and action through the vast array of seemingly unrelated life situations to the successful identification and attainment of the goal of living. It achieves this by showing how all the events in a person's life are integrally related to his/her destiny. Through it is revealed the spiritual value of each and every event in a person's life. (pp. 46-47)

In other words, from the African perspective, nothing is more valuable than the blooming of one's spirit and the subsequent recognition of the existence and function of spirit in all things tangible and non-tangible. If a person or event attempts to thrive without spirit as its ultimate motivation, it has no place or value in the African-centered world. Ra Un Nefer Amen (1990) goes on to explain how a ten-step model, known as the Tree of Life, guided ancient African ancestors from their physical or animalistic self (Geb) to their highest spiritual existence or absolute oneness with God (Amen). The steps are ordered thusly:
Level 0 - Amen (Perfect Peace or "Hetep")

Level 1 - Ausar (Omnipresence, Oneness, The Self dwelling in all things)

Level 2 - Tehuti (Wisdom, Divine Will, Omniscience, Living Oracle of instruction to others)

Level 3 - Sekert (Omnipotence, Vessel of God to bring about change in the lives of others)

Level 4 - Maat (Order, Balance, Divine Law, Recognition of oneness with all things)

Level 5 - Herukhuti (Justice, Objective Analysis of life issues)

Level 6 - Heru (The Will, Decisions, Freedom From Emotional and Sensual Impulses)

Level 7 - Het-Heru (Imagination, Attraction)

Level 8 - Sebek (Communication, Establishing of One's Belief System)

Level 9 - Auset (Receptivity, Correction of One's Wrongs)

Level 10 - Geb (The Body, Birth) (pp. 244-248)

One notices immediately that there are actually eleven levels; however, the lowest level, Geb, results simply from one's birth. It is not a level of personal work or achievement; hence, the actual ascension of one's spirit begins with Auset and ends with Amen. Every life issue is reflected in this model and every human being has the opportunity to master his/her highest spiritual self by learning the principles that govern each level and pushing one's self to maintain them.

Janheinz Jahn’s *Muntu* (1989) confirms that spirit or spirituality stands as the cornerstone of any phenomena recognized as decidedly African. Using the language and categorizing system of the Bantu of Rwanda, he posits that all existence is permeated by spirit and can be conceptualized in one of four categories:

Muntu = human being (plural: Bantu)

Kintu = thing (plural: Bintu)

Hantu = place and time

Kuntu = modality
He explains: “NTU is the universal force as such (spirit), which, however, never occurs apart from its manifestation: Muntu, Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu. NTU is Being itself, the cosmic universal force which only modern, rationalizing thought can abstract from its manifestations. NTU is that force in which Being and beings coalesce” (p. 78). That Ntu or spirit appears in all things supports my contention that nothing is more basic to an African-centered position than the question of how spirit guides, governs, influences and/or admonishes a person, event, or existence. In Yurugu: An African-centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior, Marimba Ani (1995) maintains that “In the African view of the human, the emotional-spiritual and the rational-material are inextricably bound together, and if anything, it is a human being’s spirituality that defines her as human” (p. 203). She also says, “In my view, spirit is nature and human as well as ‘supernature.’ It is the metaphysical. It accounts for human moral sense, commitment, value, and emotion: for human creativity and culture. It constitutes the substratum out of which the intellect is born and by which it is properly grounded” (p. 89). Ani (1995) is careful to note that aspects of the African worldview are shared by other people of color such as the Native American, yet she is also clear that the European worldview stands in stark contrast to that of the African. And because the African world has been so intruded upon by Europeans, the goal of her work is to assure clarity of the seeds of such cultural difference.

Nonetheless, the point made is that spirit governs all reality in the African worldview, and any analysis—including the literary—that claims an African center must, at some point, wrestle with the question of spirit and how it gets utilized in the text. By way of definition then, an Afrocentric literary analysis is one in which the critic examines motifs, themes, characters, and other textual (and metatextual) elements as they function to illumine or undergird the principles dictated by an African worldview. He also investigates the complexity of the ways in which the author has used such elements. The value of the literary effort itself in terms of form, structure, etc. is another question which the Afrocentric literary critic—like any other critic—gets to answer; my argument, simply, is that if the methodological basis of the literary analysis is rooted from the same tree as the text under evaluation, then the resulting assessment would yield more accurate finds. To show how this works, I shall sift, through an Afrocentric gaze, Ernest Gaines’ (1978) In My Father’s House and John Wideman’s (1973) The Lynchers, to show how a deficient spirituality, manifested via
negative Black male self-perceptions and poor father-son relationships, problematized African American manhood acquisition in the 1970s.

Of prime importance in these texts in terms of spirit is the peculiarity of the male characters' names. Historically, among African-descended people, a person's name signifies the nature and purpose of his spiritual relationships, both to the universe and to the community (see Asante, 1991). It "calls" him to manifest whatever the name means in hopes of fulfilling the assigned destiny. A person's role in life or contribution to the community is reinforced every time the name is called. Both Gaines and Wideman utilize the potency of this African naming tradition still found—albeit modified—in the African American community. For example, in The Lynchers, readers meet "Sweetman" whose name identifies him as "the lover of lovers." His manhood or sense of self rests upon his pride in sexual performance—a reality birthed on the American plantation as seen via such mythic heros as Stagolee (see Dance, 1978, pp. 228-229). While at work, he boasts to his partner Childress about a woman he had the previous night: "I tore that pussy up. You better believe it...She got hot pants behind that action I put on her. Man's gonna need a chain to keep her home wherever he goes" (Wideman, 1973, p. 36). Of course readers know that Sweetman's manhood is not secure, for sex is an ephemeral activity. Yet further, the name "Sweetman" stands as evidence that the African naming tradition, like most other African traditions, has been distorted in America, for he receives the name as a result of his sexual virility—not because he was predestined or preordained to manifest sexual feats. In other words, by the 1970s a black male's name or nickname often described his character instead of spiritually locating it. Such misordering of the African naming tradition promotes a corresponding spiritual distortion of character which, as Wideman portrays, generally results in personal destruction of the African.

Readers also meet "Littleman," one who spends his days attempting to incite "the revolution." As a physically handicapped individual, he struggles literary and figuratively to be recognized as a complete man. His name, however, speaks more of his spiritual and intellectual limitations than his physical abilities. He is hot-headed and sometimes irrational, leading him always to be less than his spiritual potential. The fact that he is governed more by his heart than his head foreshadows his imminent doom and justifies his conclusion that he is a "little" man.
“Robert X” is the troubled young antagonist in *In My Father’s House*. The “X” is testimony of Robert’s ambiguous self-perception—he confers the letter upon himself—and, more specifically, indicates his troubled paternal legacy. The name also conjures the spirit and memory of the legendary Malcolm X, for Robert seeks the healing of his heart “by any means necessary.” But exactly how confronting his father will usher in such healing he does not know; hence, the “X” signifies ambiguity of personal motive as well as of identity. The point here is that even before Gaines’ and Wideman’s characters are developed, their names alone reflect their battle to attain or retain what they perceive to be manhood. In fact, both novels are simply oral reports of the pyrrhic victories and ultimate defeat of spiritual-deplete Black men in their incessant struggle for manhood in America.

Sweetman is the first of Wideman’s characters whose spiritual deficiencies announce themselves. He has no sense of self because he has no spiritual center. He is a middle-aged man who has concluded that the Black man’s struggle for self worth in America is useless. Defining his entire existence in European terms, his self-assessment always leaves him depressed, for he possesses nothing material which he thinks necessary to buttress a positive self-image. He is so absolutely disconnected from his own traditions and values as a Black man that he knows little else to do besides dismiss himself from reality via alcohol and spend his days roaming the streets of Philadelphia in search of spontaneous entertainment. In *Cool Pose*, Majors and Billson (1993) remind us that

by middle age, black males consume more alcohol than white males, and a higher percentage of black males are diagnosed with alcohol-related disorders. Consequently, problem drinking is more common among blacks than it is among whites, which suggests a close relationship between stress and destructive behavior. The consumption of alcohol and drugs in black communities can be viewed as an attempt to cope with social and psychological frustrations resulting from unemployment and underemployment, poverty and inflation, inadequate housing, family problems, and discrimination. (p. 22)

Still, alcohol does not and cannot provide Sweetman any basis upon which he might validate his manhood. Indeed, Sweetman’s greatest weakness is that his definition of manhood reflects nothing spiritual that would call him to return unto himself (and his people) as he seeks the meaning and value of life. His son, Thomas Wilkerson, attempts to extend love and appreciation to his father, but Sweetman ignores it or,
more plausibly, cannot receive it, for he has convinced himself that he is and forever shall be an empty vessel. Further, he can afford to have no concern for anything or anyone, he thinks, since his own self-perceived impotence would only be exacerbated while he stands before another. Sweetman’s wife understands his plight, but knows that she can offer him no solace, as a man must come to terms with his own spirit first. Yet, Sweetman is so blinded by the hope of material gain that he never considers the possibility of the beauty and self-defining power of his own spirit. Hence, his wife tells their son: “Your father’s still drinking hisself to death fast as he can. He’s ashamed to look me in the eye, not so much cause of what he’s doing to me. I was never very much to him. He’s shamed because he know I know what he’s doing to himself” (Wideman, 1973, p. 94).

Childress, Sweetman’s co-worker, offers him the only taste of brotherhood, i.e., community, he has ever known. Sweetman is free with Childress; his emasculation does not embarrass him in front of Childress, undoubtedly because Sweetman perceives himself and Childress equally impotent. Such a camaraderie should provide a context wherein both men find a self-worth which leaves them viable. Yet, due to self-hatred and the belief that everything powerful is White, the two men actually assist each others’ destruction. In a traditional African community, Sweetman and Childress might have found joy in, say, preparing boys for their manhood rites and thereby contributing to the spiritual vitality of their people. Yet, in inner-city Philadelphia in the 1970s, the two men are so disconnected from any semblance of spirituality that they see no connection between themselves and anybody else. The resulting alienation causes the two, subconsciously, to view the other as enemy instead of brother. This spiritual estrangement between the two reveals itself in the form of murder. One evening, in drunken states, Childress and Sweetman begin to argue over a financial issue. The argument evolves into a physical confrontation and ends when Sweetman stabs Childress to death. He never intends to kill Childress and, in fact, the incident leaves him more convinced than ever that some invisible foe governs his existence. Half conscious, Sweetman says to his son:

I thought about our children and his children. I started crying when I thought of you all looking at us, two grown men, two ghosts...I wanted all that was still alive in me to fall off my shoulders and give him back his life. I wanted to be dying in his arms, but all I could do was cry like a baby. And cry because I
was crying because I was so pitiful in your eyes and their eyes
and had nothing and he had nothing...Why did I have to be left
behind to speak for both of us. (Wideman, 1973, p. 207)

In essence, their inability as Black men to discover a spiritual
essence within themselves and between each other raises
doubt about the spiritual nature of their brotherhood and
causes them, ultimately, to destroy each other. They have
succumbed to a world that seemingly enjoys their demise,
having no plan of action for how to survive it. They, like most
other Black men, rest their manhood upon their ability to
provide, protect, and wield power over a family. Unfortunately,
when an adult Black male cannot boast the manifestation of
these physical achievements, his masculinity, his self-belief,
his life often suffer because he neither seeks nor creates any
spiritual space wherein a new, spiritually-charged definition of
manhood can be born. So, unfortunately, both men reach the
inevitability of their spiritual death; but in reality both would
also die literally, for the price of Childress' murder would surely
be Sweetman's life in prison.

Littleman, the protagonist in The Lynchers, possesses
the same spiritual limitations as Sweetman and Childress. He
contends that The Man—the White man—has his claws around
the Black man's neck and squeezes harder every day. He is
absolutely obsessed with White existence and defines his
entire reality in reaction to what whites have done to Blacks. He
never considers the possibility that Black life has a spiritual
component that even the most powerful Whites cannot dis-
turb. Yet such an “other-based” self-definition is logical in his
case because everything he desires is what whites already
possess. His anger at the ubiquitous nature of racism in the
1970s keeps his attention focused beyond himself and his own
inert cosmic power. Because Littleman's voice is more central
than any others in The Lynchers, one could argue that he
speaks for and represents the frustrations, hopes, and strivings
of black men of his time—textually and socially. And after
examining the lives of the brothers he knows, Littleman paral-
lels the White man's power over the Black man to the power
God wields over the universe. He says, “the Man gives and the
Man takes away. He's the judge and jury and we could hardly
expect him to convict himself” (Wideman, 1973, p. 66). Littleman
finds inconceivable the notion that a Black man could ever
control his own fate in America without serious disruption of
the social and even cosmic order.

Yet, he also concludes, contradictorily, that for a Black
man to live without confirmation of his manhood is to concede
victory unto the White enemy. Certainly he cannot allow such success at the expense of his people. Therefore, he and some "brothas" concoct a scheme to lynch a white policeman in order to "declare our understanding of the past, our scorn for it, our disregard for any consequences that the past has taught us to fear. We also deny any future except one conditioned by new definitions of ourselves as fighters, free, violent men who will determine the nature of the reality in which they exist" (Wideman, 1973, p. 117). Littleman believes that anything Black men ever attain must be done so by force. But, of course, the use of such a destructive ritual as lynching to validate one's manhood is sign of Littleman's spiritual limitations. Said differently, Littleman's need to make his manhood such a public declaration stands as proof that he does not recognize the seat of his essence to be within himself. Further, to hope that the same ritual that historically destroyed Black men will now, simply with a white victim, offer him strength and inner-peace is the evidence of a rather juvenile sensibility. Littleman claims to despise whites and the power they enjoy when, in actuality, he loves them more than himself as evidenced by the fact that everything he desires for himself is rooted in the Euro-American concept of manhood. Nonetheless, Rice, Saunders, and Wilkerson—the other co-conspirators in the text—all join (although not without reservation) in the lynching conspiracy, wanting nothing more than a mere taste of social and personal triumph. Littleman's crippled leg also makes his declaration of Black self-determination more severe in that, as aforestated, his struggle is both literal and social. Metaphorically, he perceives himself crippled because he is a Black man in America. Other male characters share this perception, but their social ideology is not so extreme as to require the author to assign an accompanying physical manifestation. James Coleman (1989), author of Blackness and Modernism: The Literary Career of John Edgar Wideman, postulates this:

Wideman uses Littleman's crippled body to make a statement about the conspirators' unrealistic attempts to change the external world of the black community. Littleman can present an illusion of himself while he is sitting at the bar, and his smooth talk is enough to excite a prostitute about the possibilities. But the withered legs cannot maneuver him into position to demonstrate what he believes is his sexual prowess. (appendix pp. 58-59)

Readers soon note that, for all the conspirators, they are most severely spiritually crippled. They are unable to utilize the community they have created for their own personal growth
and livelihood; instead, they attempt to manipulate the power of community for destructive means, praying that such an evil act will confirm their manhood, their being. Yet, just as Littleman’s withered leg disallows him the opportunity to perpetuate the illusion of sexual prowess, so the conspirators’ spiritual handicap disallows them the ability to construct a space (if solely among themselves) wherein their Black male identity can thrive without the need for an external referent. Clearly these men lack a consciousness rooted in African spirituality, and they are obviously unaware of the redemptive potential of their own unity. Littleman best reflects this spiritual deprivation, and after a serious fall at a public rally, he is confined to a hospital bed and thereby forced to relinquish the implementation of the lynching plan unto his co-conspirators. However, as one might suspect, the plan never comes to fruition. Too many things go awry, including internal betrayal and, in the end, Littleman labels himself “a crippled bastard they [whites] broke into even smaller pieces” (Wideman, 1973, p. 193).

Yet, to be sure, the failure of the lynch plan is not Littleman’s alone; the greatest foible “which ensures the failure of the plan from the beginning is the group’s need to ensure against individual copout. It is an insurance needed because of the absence of ideological unity within the group” (Mbalia, 1995, p. 46). In other words, neither the plan nor the men have a spiritual underpinning that would serve to provide clarity and determination. They do not trust one another any more than they trust the white cop, precisely because their own relationships are devoid of spirit. They never celebrate one another, they never employ each other in the soothing of their broken spirits, and they never learn that everything they need in order to have joy and manhood comes from within. Hence, they wander the streets of Philadelphia angry that someone won’t give their manhood back.

This perception by Wideman’s middle-age Black male characters that Whites rule all and, therefore, make the attainment of their manhood practically impossible is mirrored by the men in Ernest Gaines’ (1978) In My Father’s House. Of course the real problem is that none of the men in these novels—or many other novels by Black male authors—stand connected to the spiritual tradition of their people and, consequently, never find ways to withstand the onslaught of racism upon their manhood. Therefore, they have no choice but to wander lost in a Eurocentric wilderness that suffocates any potential they might have to save themselves. Ironically, Phillip
Martin, the sixty-year-old protagonist in *In My Father's House*, is in the salvation business. He is the pastor of Solid Rock Baptist Church and is also the local civil rights leader. Yet, his Christian commitment does not result in a strong spiritual sensibility. Actually, instead of the church strengthening him to stand as a man with his own spiritual convictions as pillars, it serves as a hiding place for a very weak soul. In other words, since Phillip cannot secure his manhood on earth, he turns to God to confirm his self-worth and retains his manhood “by identifying himself with a strong, wrathful, old God and (assuming) vicariously (His) masculinity” (Margolies, 1968, p. 106). He tells his son that, unlike his past sojourn in the world to become a man, “today I have strength. Cause today I have God” (Gaines, 1978, p. 100). Phillip goes on: “I’m a man today. I prayed for Him to make me a man, and He made me a man” (p. 102). Consequently, Phillip has dismissed the Black male’s earthly battle for manhood and moved into a metaphysical realm where his manhood is not contestable, he believes. Certainly such a move is problematic because a true spiritual existence should leave one empowered both on earth and in heaven. However, Phillip is too blinded by Christian dogma to see that the very ideology he employs to validate his manhood serves to limit his spiritual insight. Put differently, the shift from social to religious construct wherein Phillip circumscribes a viable definition of Black manhood creates a distance between him and the rest of his Black brothers as he leaves them on the earth struggling helplessly while he takes refuge in God, the Ultimate Man.

Phillip’s bigger issue, however, is that he uses God and the church to attempt to erase his past. He is of the belief that, once he accepts Christ as personal Savior, his past can be both forgiven and forgotten. Yet, his past sins soon confront him and force him to see that “…he must journey into the past to reconstruct his past life and connect it with the present in order to integrate these disparate parts into a unified identity” (Beavers, 1995, p. 94). He fears such a move, however, primarily because he possesses no spiritual center which assures him of his self-worth regardless of how many sins he has committed. His role as local civil rights leader serves simply as yet another fortress behind which he cowers in fear of the truth of his own life. He leads rallies and public protests while his personal life crumbles by the day. The wife and child he abandoned in his “former” life now stand as signs of a past he can never totally relinquish. In *Wrestling Angels into Song*, literary critic Herman Beavers (1995) asserts that “[Phillip’s] reliance upon what has
become an outmoded form of protest, his inability to improvise a movement capable of embracing new ideas and voices, speak to a deeper, more fundamental issue: his inability to reconcile the past and the present” (p. 87). He so wishes that God would erase away Johanna and Etienne—his former girlfriend and son—and let him stand before his current congregation without spot or blemish. Of course this does not happen. Unfortunately, Phillip associates “salvation” with perfection, and, hence, he can never see himself as truly divine, for the evidence of his imperfection—his illegitimate son—has come to town to expose him.

Phillip now has a dilemma to solve—either embrace his son to whom he owes paternal love or reject him and live a life of guilt. He chooses neither option initially because he is spiritually too weak. He has a concept of God and righteousness which is so narrow as not to allow for the embracing of truth if it leaves one seen as “ unholy.” In other words, “While he is correct in his assertion that racial segregation and discrimination divested him, like other black men, of the emotional resources necessary to maintain his family, the course he chooses to overdetermine political activism and thus become a man of action comes at the expense of spiritual growth” (Beavers, 1995, p. 93). He is much too immature in his understanding of manhood, quite frankly, and hides behind God much like a shy, scared child. Ultimately, he learns that a man must face himself and walk with what he sees. Yet, this growth comes at the cost of his son’s life.

Eventually, to no one’s surprise, Phillip becomes angry with God for not securing him an existence free of trials and tribulations. In an interview with Mary Ellen Doyle, Gaines himself says, “God helped the minister to help other people, but when he needed God to bring himself and his son together, God failed” (see Lowe (ed), 1995, p. 163). Phillip sees this failure as God having reneged on the promise of salvation. The embracing of the church, as Phillip perceives, was supposed to wash him “white as snow.” Yet, when his past sins find him out, Phillip begins to question the real truth of the gospel and begins to wonder if, in fact, God can make him a man. Of course what Phillip does not realize is that his Euro-centered religious construct is too limiting and does not allow for the healing necessary between him and his past in order to feel good about his present. Consequently, he treats God like some recalcitrant being whose loyalty to him must be questioned in the midst of every struggle. And, like Sweetman, Childress, and Littleman, Phillip Martin deteriorates into a self-pitying, helpless Black
man who desperately needs a spiritual foundation rooted in self-love so that he might be able to mold something beautiful out of a world that has emasculated him. The fact that none of these men—alone or together—ever forge such a spiritual front shows that their definition of self and, by extension, manhood has its roots in a place foreign to their sensibility. Hence, their understanding of manhood always includes elements outside of their control and always leaves them worse in the end than they began.

Chippo, Phillip’s life-long companion, shares a fate similar to that of the other middle-aged Black male characters. He too sees himself as an island, having concluded that, as a Black man, nothing he ever touches will be fruitful. The lack of a spiritual consciousness which might help him garner some sense of purpose leads him to believe that he has nothing to give and no arms to receive. Chippo has spent his years as a wanderer, seeking nothing constant and wanting no more from life than a good crap game. He understands nothing about himself, his history, and, most importantly, his spirit. His self-definition rests entirely upon what the white man disallows him, and unfortunately, he is unable even to imagine the spiritual legacy of Black strength and pride which his ancestors called upon for survival. Like others his age, he has discontinued the Black male quest for self-determination. Yet, unlike the others, Chippo insists on having fun with the modicum of agency he sometimes enjoys. Philosophically, he believes that a Black man’s life is much like a carnival—some games are won, some lost, but all are played. And if one leaves empty handed, simply having played makes life worthwhile.

Like Littleman, Chippo has a handicap; he has a bad eye—a souvenir secured while playing one of life’s games. Although readers never learn exactly how he loses the eye, the narrator says this about Chippo: “He looked like a person who did not worry much; he would take life as it came” (Gaines, 1978, p. 180). He has already resigned to having lost his battle for manhood in America because, unknown to him, he enters the struggle with no spiritual armor. In other words, he employs none of the spiritual resources of his own community to survive American racism because he is unable to connect himself and his life to the cosmic source of his people. He sees himself as the beginning and the end of himself; hence, his limited self-perception is logical. So instead of cultivating a spiritual fortress which would protect him and his manhood, he uses women, money, and alcohol as his primary coping mechanisms as he floats through life with a nonchalant dispo-
sition. In short, these novels suggest that middle aged Black men of the 1970s perceived their fight for manhood to be a useless endeavor, for, in America, “only one side is allowed to fight” (Gaines, 1978, p. 118).

At this point, readers see that Sweetman, Littleman, Phillip, and Chippo all essentially have the same story. Actually, they are perfect reflections of each other, for although one is a preacher, another a revolutionary, and another a street wanderer, the similarity of their responses to an unachieved manhood blurs their individuality. In fact, critic Valerie Babb (1991) maintains that, in In My Father’s House, “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” (p. 109). In other words, the Black male struggle for manhood in America in the 1970s was ultimately both an individual and a collective pursuit. The conclusion by each aforementioned character that manhood is not the Black man’s to enjoy must be seen as a shortcoming both of each man’s unachieved spiritual potential and their collective blindness to the inherent strength of the Black community. This is true because the spirituality that these male characters need in order to withstand the onslaught of America upon their self-worth can only be cultivated from within. However, their eyes are blinded to such truth. This failure of sight could result from a spiritually deficient Black community in the 1970s or from authors who simply fail to place their characters within a spiritual context reflective of African American life. Yet, regardless of why, what is sure is that none of them possess the spiritual resources necessary for self-maintenance and, consequently, they faint from an exhaustive attempt to attain a manhood which is, ironically, ruled and governed by their enemy.

Similarly, young men of the same era appear to be loners, having concluded either that they will fight the revolution alone or that, as young Black men, they will be content to live in isolation. Essential to note here is that the negative plight of these young men results not from their failed attempt to prove themselves to the larger social structure, but from their inability to win their fathers’ sanction. For example, Robert and Billy in In My Father’s House and Wilkerson in The Lynchers are three young men who have tired themselves in the search for paternal approval and acceptance, although to no avail. They are troubled, pain-stricken, spiritually lost souls desperate for their fathers to affirm their existence and to authenticate their sense of self—the ingredients of their man-
hood. But their fathers are incapable of rendering such sanction because, as previously determined, they have no spiritual wellspring and, hence, no means by which to help their sons love themselves. Yet sons refuse to accept the necessary validation from any other source. Consequently, these boys roam the world as Bigger Thomases, full of anger and rage that a spiritual connection to their fathers could have alleviated.

Gaines’ Robert X is a brilliant portrayal of the dilemma young Black men face when forced to exist outside of their father’s spiritual embrace. He is also a poignant demonstration of what happens to sons when fathers do not leave them a spiritual legacy that affords them the tools necessary to construct a resilient manhood. Actually, Phillip attempts to forget that Robert X even exists. As fate would have it, twenty-seven years later, Robert X journeys from Chicago to St. Adrienne, Louisiana to confront Phillip about having abandoned him. He has changed his name from Etienne to “Robert X,” thereby repudiating any connection to his father which the original name might have signified. But by age twenty-seven, Robert is a shy, angry, hate-filled, hurt young man. He has nightmares about Phillip’s abandonment of him and his mother and often cries himself to sleep. Robert tells a friend, “My soul don’t feel good...Like garbage, broke glass, tin cans. Any trash” (Gaines, 1978, p. 25). He feels unloved and unwanted and speaks to others only when he must. His own spirit gets no attention at all, for he appears unable to recognize it. In his estimation, nothing is more important than a spiritual connection to his father; yet, he appears to despise Phillip so completely that, actually, such a connection is made impossible. Of course readers know that Robert X really loves his father and seeks nothing more than a physical and spiritual reunion with him. The text implies that Phillip’s inability to meet this need, however, assures his son’s death. Wideman (1994) says in Fatheralong that

Ideals of manhood, true and transforming, grow out of private, personal exchanges between fathers and sons. Yet for generations of black men in America this privacy, this privilege has been systematically breached in a most shameful and public way. Not only breached, but brutally usurped, mediated by murder, mayhem, misinformation. Generation after generation of black men, deprived of the voices of their fathers, are for all intents and purposes born semi-orphans. (pp. 64-65)

Such is the case with Phillip. Critic Daniel White (1994) asserts, in fact, that “Phillip accomplished many things for his people and earned respectability for himself, but these feats do not, as
[Phillip] Martin has believed, compensate for deserting his son. The fragility of his self-deception becomes apparent when...he receives a second chance to claim [Robert X] and fails pathetically” (p. 164).

Unfortunately, Robert X never learns to look within his own spirit for self-renewal. Such a move can only be taught by one whose spiritual cultivation lends itself to the task. Phillip should have been that spiritual teacher, showing Robert how to negotiate himself through the hell of America. The fact that Robert is now prepared to kill him, however, suggests that the absence of such spiritual lessons between fathers and sons ultimately destroy both of them. Robert X has cultivated no other relationships in his life because paternal rejection equals self-rejection and, hence, disallows him the ability to love. Figuratively, he says that his home is his “prison.” He is paying for his father’s crimes, he believes, and concedes that he can never do anything in life until his prison sentence is over, i.e., until he leaves home and finds his father. Yet, the spiritually debunked father he finds makes him conclude that “It [life] all adds up to the same thing. No matter what you do, no mater how hard you work, how much you love, they catch you off guard one day and break you. It don’t matter if you’re glass and tin, or meat and bone” (Gaines, 1978, p. 27). Because Robert is young, fragile, and outside of his own spiritual tradition, he has not learned how to cope with the vicissitudes of life; rather, he insists that there must be more in the world for a young Black man than work, struggle, and rejection. Yet, his inability to fashion any meaning from a lifetime of hurt and abandonment leads him to assert, “I’m sick...My soul is sick.” (p. 27).

Once Robert X actually meets his father, he (Robert X) realizes that the void in his heart is far too wide and deep for Phillip to fill. The search has been too long, and the spiritual empowerment which Robert desperately needs, Phillip cannot provide. Phillip is actually ashamed of Robert X, for Robert’s very existence is sign of a former life of sin Phillip would rather forget. Hence, when Robert returns, Phillip rejects him again. The narrator notes that Robert X is seen by townspeople in front of the church, at the cemetery, and on the bank of the St. Charles River, undoubtly in search of the same super power or spiritual force which has seemingly vitalized his father to date. His efforts are fruitless, however, and, when asked, he asserts that the purpose of his visit to St. Adrienne is to attend a Black manhood conference. What he does not say is that he intends to avenge his rejected spirit. He wants to kill Phillip because Phillip’s abandoning of him destroyed his life. He has
a gun, but readers know that he will never use it for, as
aforedetermined, he is ambivalent about his feelings for Phillip.
He loves his father, but hates him for not loving him in return.
Actually, he hates his father most for not providing him with
a spiritual potency necessary to survive. Phillip asks Robert X
what he wants revenge for and he says, “for [you] making me
the eunuch I am” (Gaines, 1978 p. 99). He goes on: “You down
here saving souls. After you had destroyed [me], you down
here saving souls. Don’t you think that’s funny? I think it’s
funny” (p. 100). Phillip weeps as his son exposes his spiritual
hypocrisy. “I wasn’t a man then,” Phillip pleads, but Robert
rejects his explanation as mere excuse. God serves as no
comfort to Robert X, for, as he says, “I prayed, and prayed and
prayed. He never answered [me]. I know He never answered
[me]” (p. 102). So Robert’s confrontation with his father brings
neither clarity nor comfort to his sick soul because Phillip
cannot explain convincingly how his deficient manhood caused
him to abandon his son years ago. Even if He could, Robert X’s
anger and pain have festered for 27 years and, ironically,
become the poison on which he feeds. Deep down, Phillip
wants to love his son, but never knew how to access his own
spiritual power in order to do so. He has directed his life
energies towards the disembodied church; hence, when called
upon to perform earthly tasks such as loving his son, he
becomes inoperative. Readers expect Robert X to die eventu-
ally, for the paternal validation of his manhood and the
spiritual reconnection to his father never occur. Indeed, “All of
this self-torture inevitably leads Phillip Martin to question his
own manhood, but it will take a journey into his past for him to
discover just how erroneous his entire concept of manhood
has been” (White, 1994, p. 165). Sadly, this “journey” never
happens either. Consequently, the novel suggests that Phillip’s
deficient manhood, defined outside of an African American
socio-spiritual tradition, causes him to destroy both himself
and his son.

Unfortunately, Robert X is not alone on this fruitless
quest. Billy, a young man Phillip meets while looking for
Chippo, is also one whose young voice can be heard crying in
the wilderness for a Black father to love him. He is the ultimate
rebel who lacks spiritual direction and connection; conse-
quentially, he is in the process of planning how, when, and where
to incite the imminent, violent Black revolution. Like Robert X’s
sick soul, Billy’s rebellious condition is more attributable to a
poor father-son relationship than to the findings of any real
sociological interrogation of Black existence. Upon being asked
about his father, Billy says cooly, “I don’t bother him, he don’t bother me” (Gaines, 1978, p. 165). He, like the young Richard in Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*, laughingly describes all Black men as “one whipped dog running to another whipped dog” (Baldwin, 1964, p. 34). Phillip then asks Billy if the church can help to close the gap between Black fathers and sons, and Billy says, “sh*t...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” (Gaines, 1978, p. 166). So Billy joins Robert X in his dismissal of both the church and God as useless institutions to effect any real change in the Black male dilemma. Yet, the Black church is not what the two young men really reject; what disturbs them most is that their fathers have used the church as a means of escaping their paternal responsibilities. To Robert X and Billy, it makes little sense to attend church and yet garner no spiritual connection to one’s own children. Hence, they conclude that church must not be the healing mechanism necessary to reunite Black fathers and sons. Indeed, the two would rather their fathers love them and teach them how to love themselves instead of superficially serving a God who never seems to empower Black men. Robert X and Billy possess sufficient insight to see that the Black church has not left their fathers with the spiritual weaponry necessary to combat American onslaughts against Black manhood. Hence, the church is not the aim of their desires. What these boys seek metatextually is a spiritual tradition and, consequently, a manhood which cannot be altered by their physical environment. Yet, their fathers cannot provide as much because of the latter’s own estrangement from self and community. Billy’s uncompromising commitment to the Black revolution further illustrates his troubled personal life, for he intends to incite a social riot which he hopes will destroy the world, including himself, if need be. Without a viable spiritual source, given to him by a father who loves him, Billy can imagine no reason to live. He tells Phillip:

This little black ass nigger you see sitting here ‘side you will one day destroy this world, Pops. We been here nearly 400 years—nothing to show for it but pain and sorrow...I got news for you, Pops, this world ain’t going on like this much longer. This little black ass nigger you see sitting here ‘side you go’n make sure of that. He go’n take one match—one match one day—and he gon’ start the biggest revolution this world ever knowed. If I go with it, I go. if the world go with it, let the world go. Let the roaches have the ashes. (Gaines, 1978, p. 164)
Billy's personal anger is nothing more than his disconnection from his own spiritual center. He has concluded that his relationship with his father is no longer important when, in reality, the resulting dissatisfaction keeps turmoil fresh in his flesh and makes him the ideal leader for the destruction he describes. Like Robert X, Billy has been unable to formulate other relationships due to his ambiguous identity and intends to destroy the world simply because his father never knew how to love him.

Wilkerson, Sweetman's son in *The Lynchers*, confirms the theory that a poor Black father-son relationship leaves the son angry and groping in the dark for paternal-love replacements. However, unlike Robert and Billy, Wilkerson is a college graduate who teaches at a junior high school in Philadelphia. Readers know that education has been his escape mechanism—like the revolution is for Billy and silence is for Robert X. But his return home to teach reintroduces him to the reality that he and his father never merged, and, as a young adult, he realizes that he can evade his father no longer. Consequently, he agrees to participate in the lynch plan as a way of convincing himself of his manhood and doing something his father will surely applaud. Yet, he is afraid because he has not the heart to kill. The narrator notes: “When they talked of the plan he gave his assent not as a killer, but as one who was beginning to understand why the others must kill. And why he must choose to aid them” (Wideman, 1973, p. 50). At the onset of the conspiracy, Wilkerson is a timid, confused young man who, though educated, desperately needs his father’s intervention in his life. He takes a girlfriend to his parent’s home to meet them, and while his mother prays that his drunken father will not come home, Wilkerson says, “He’s my father. I want him here” (Wideman, 1973, p. 94). He appears willing to excuse any of Sweetman’s foibles if the latter will simply be there when Wilkerson needs him.

Education has provided Wilkerson with the necessary analytical tools to understand his father’s plight although this knowledge alters little concerning his desire to be embraced by him. Says he, “[I] need to embrace my father, though for years I had accepted and tried to accustom myself to the fact that I no longer had a father” (Wideman, 1973, p. 145). This spiritual distance between the two at first helps Wilkerson cope with the reality of never knowing Sweetman. But upon seeing him again, he remembers: “Sweetman rocking me to sleep. Maybe drunk, maybe just come from the women who were breaking my mother’s heart, maybe not there at all but a memory of that
time he did come, pungent, taller than the storm. My arms around the heavy shoulders, laughing together” (p. 144). Actually, Wilkerson’s predicament might be worse than Billy’s and Robert X’s because he has explored other options to replace his paternal longing, only to end up an educated, traveled son even more desperate for his father’s love. His analytical skills allow him to comprehend more completely the Black male plight, but this understanding, ironically, offers him no spiritual consolation. The streets of Philadelphia know him better than anyone, as he walks them daily contemplating reality: “The preposterousness of it all. My father hiding from the storm. And when he’s not cowering, dying by inches. I see him plainly. He has become the child. Within my father’s shrunken shadow there are no quiet recesses. Because I see him differently, I try to believe I have changed. I pretend I have outgrown the need for misty dependence” (p. 144). But he knows he has not. The best he can do, he decides, is to continue loving and supporting Sweetman in hopes that his affection will one day be reciprocated.

Wilkerson’s paternal need is made more poignant when Saunders, one of the four lynching conspirators, says that Wilkerson is a light-skinned brother who actually reminds him of “the raping white devil” (Wideman, 1973, p. 156). Readers see that Wilkerson needs Sweetman not only to confirm his sense of self as his son, but also to provide him with a solid racial identity. Unfortunately, neither need gets met. Hence, Wilkerson confirms his participation in the lynching scheme, all because he desires to perform some act to prove his selfhood, his Black manhood. In reality, though, he joins the conspirators due to pressure and coaxing, believing—somehow—that his role in the lynching of the white policeman will promote him at least to manhood candidacy.

Gaines and Wideman both seem to believe that sons are of little good to themselves, others, or society when they lack paternal sanction. They either live their lives in isolation like Robert X, having decided that, besides a father’s love, nothing else matters or, like Wilkerson, they search to understand why their father is the way he is, hoping then to utilize such knowledge to fill their personal and spiritual voids. However, young men cannot—and do not—live the duration of their lives yearning for the impossible. In the end, these novels suggest that when a young Black male is unable to secure some semblance of manhood, especially via his father’s approval, death results.
When Rice, the fourth conspirator, kills Wilkerson, readers are initially shocked and even horrified. Wilkerson knocks on Rice’s apartment door and, in the midst of a sleepless night, when Rice doubts the other conspirators’ trust in him as the keeper of arms, Rice panics and “aims where he thinks the center of the door should be, then makes a fiery shambles of the darkness as he pulls the trigger” (Wideman, 1973, p. 241). After a moment of disbelief, however, Wilkerson’s death becomes logical. He is the most dubious of the conspirators and has no real commitment to the establishing of a new Black order. Indeed, his motivation reflects no allegiance to a belief in the power of the Black man. Instead, his alacrity results from a hope more spiritual than social. And when this spiritual hope of knowing himself via his father goes unrealized, his demise is certain. Never does he intend to evolve into a being similar to Littleman or Sweetman, but he has no other option. The novel suggests that life in America usually affords Black men little room wherein to assess their own spiritual existence sufficient to break generational cycles of hopelessness. Hence, Wilkerson has no choice but to inherit the psychological state of his father and other spiritually deprived Black men. He must either join the ranks of his suicidal peers and fight for enough strength of character to live for a moment or reject the prescribed Black male definition of manhood and stand alone as he engineers some new possibility. But of course Wilkerson cannot do the latter because it requires a spiritual foundation that he thinks only Sweetman can provide. When this does not happen, Wilkerson has no alternative, the text implies, but to return to his Original Creator—the One whose love for him is sure. Yet, this is not a conscious choice. The implication here is that, due to a poor legacy of paternal spirituality, most young Black boys in America resolve either to be at peace with social strangulation or to die in their ineffectual quest for self-definition or manhood. Wilkerson meets the latter fate.

So does Robert X. Once he realizes that his anticipated father-son showdown does not ameliorate his “sick soul,” he commits suicide. A close friend tells Phillip lamentably, “Today at three o’clock, Alceé iejean saw [Robert] standing on that trestle over Big Man Bayou. Late tonight—Shepherd had to check his voice a moment—Nolan and his deputies pulled him out of the water” (Gaines, 1978, p. 203). Once again, readers are startled because Robert X’s purpose in coming to St. Adrienne is to kill his father—not himself: “that person [Robert] come here to meet he come here to kill” (p. 74). Yet, retrospectively, such an act makes sense because Robert arrives in St.
Adrienne a spiritually-desolate young man. His father's inability to connect with him only exacerbates his self-hatred and illumines his perceived wretchedness. He has even lost the ability to feel: "[the weather] all feels the same to me" (p. 15) he says. So his own demise is foreshadowed upon arrival. Of course had Robert X been able to construct some spiritual means by which to counter the threat of self-rejection he might also have been able to transcend the yearning for paternal approval. This is impossible, however, precisely because Robert X does not know to call upon his own spiritual legacy in times of personal need. The one through whom such a legacy comes need not be one's own paternal relation certainly; indeed, spirituality is not confined by biological truths. Yet, Robert's limited sight leads him to believe that the absence of paternal approbation equals a son's worthlessness and, by extension, his abortive manhood. Therefore, he, too, becomes a Black male recall and accepts death willing in order to deflect a life of immense hurt and ever-aching wounds.

Billy's death is not seen within the course of In My Father's House, but it is an eventuality he has already accepted. Actually, he awaits death with great expectancy. Life never offers anything substantive, he deduces, so in death must be the prize. This perception makes him perfectly suited to lead the Black cabal, composed of young boys willing to die for the revolution. Billy assumes McKay's "If We Must Die" demeanor and fears death only for those who love existence as we know it. He contends that Blacks and Whites are at war, and "In war people die," he says coolly (Gaines, 1978, p.161). So, for Billy, the hope of death is his manifested disappointment both in the Black man's impotent manhood and in his father's infantile spirituality. And yet this potential revolutionary is not surrendering silently. He asks his father, "What could [the white man] do if all the fields and swamps caught fire at the same time one day? What could he do if ten, fifteen thousand gas pumps all waste gas at the same time, and somebody there to throw the match? Not a damn thing but watch it burn down" (p. 162). He goes on: "This country here is the last crunch for Western Civilization...Burn it down, you destroy Western Civilization. You put the world back right—let it start all over again. Somebody got to pay for it, that's all. I don't mind putting [my life] on the line" (p. 162). Again, his annihilistic attitude results from a defeated manhood rooted in paternal rejection. Billy tells Phillip, "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" (p. 166). In other words, Billy
stands as proof that a Black man’s social commitment does not automatically facilitate the healing of his personal relationships. Indeed, the spiritual union these sons so desperately seek with their fathers might actually be a necessary precursor to the achievement of anything public, for one’s private life will always remind him of his real success. And unless—and until—Black fathers initiate the spiritual bond with their own sons, the end assessment of their lives will always be adverse. So, like the others, Billy has no respect for himself and no honor for a father who does not realize that “more than political activism or religious ritual is needed to close the fissure between fathers and sons” (Babb, 1991, p. 106).

Yet, to be sure, Phillip and Sweetman do love their sons. They (the fathers) simply do not possess the spirituality needed to fashion a definition of manhood which would leave them empowered and able to entrust unto their sons a legacy of self-love and communal affirmation. Therefore, they have no choice but to watch in agony as their sons die a slow, wrenching death. Phillip tells Robert X painfully that, when he was first conceived,

I was paralyzed. Paralyzed. Yes, I had a mouth, but I didn’t have a voice. I had legs, but I couldn’t move. 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 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. That’s what kept me on that bed. Not ‘cause I didn’t want to get up. I wanted to get up more than anything in the world. But I had to break the rules, rules we had lived by for so long, and I wasn’t strong enough to break them. (Gaines, 1978, p. 102)

Interestingly enough, the twenty-year gap in their lives brought him no closer to manhood because he always defined it in social terms. Said differently, any definition of manhood Phillip constructs gets dismantled by the society at large and ultimately leaves him more depressed than liberated. Without tapping into his own (and his community’s) spiritual resources for self-definition, Phillip is left to inveigh for a lifetime the seemingly hopeless lives of Black men in America. And once this annihilation engulfs his son’s life, it is almost too much to bear. He says, “I don’t believe it...Why you tell me this? Bring me this kind of news?” (p. 203). Robert X’s suicide pushes Phillip to the edge of sanity. He needs a rock, a spiritual refuge, for this burden is too heavy for any father to bear, but as he says, “Go where? Go to what? To what?” (p. 204). Out of both rage and internal pain, he
runs to escape this horror, but Chippo and Shepherd stop him because they fear his psychological and emotional instability. Phillip admits that “I got grief in me, Chippo...I got grief in me, and I got fury in me” (p. 206). The spiritual healing needed to assuage his deracinated soul never comes, for Phillip does not know where to find it. He simply bemoans his loathsome existence as gloom consumes him: “You work, you work—what good it do? You bust your ass—what good it do? Man and God, both in one day, tell you to go to hell, go fuck yourself” (207).

Phillip is now forced to reassess not only his role as civil rights activist, but also his belief in the redemptive power of God. That “solid rock” he once called upon for strength has now turned to sand. Consequently, he accosts God with a vengeance almost blasphemous when he asks, “How come He let this happen? How come He stood by me all these years, but not today? Why He give me all that strength, that courage to do all them other things, and when I asked Him for my boy—Why didn’t he hear me, Chippo?...Why won’t He let this poor black man reach his son?...Was that asking Him for too much?” (p. 209). Chippo tells him to keep his faith, and Phillip explodes “You damn fool...don’t put no faith in nothing. Not in God. Not in work. Not in love. In nothing...” (p. 210). Phillip lives this creed as he further disconnects himself from those he loves because the pain of their death would be too hard to bear. Fundamentally, he diminishes the spiritual value of Black life by believing that whites hold the key to Black self-worth. Their unwillingness to concede power to the Black man enrages him and makes him the puppet of their agency. So whenever Phillip needs a balm, he is at a lost, for unless whites provide it, it does not exist. He tells his wife finally, “I’m lost...I’m lost” (214) and she tells him that he must simply start his life over again—a resolution Phillip certainly cannot fathom.

Now, although Sweetman does not learn of Wilkerson’s death in the course of The Lynchers, it is not hard to imagine a potential reaction. Like Phillip, he never extends himself to his son sufficiently to confirm his fatherhood and to assure Wilkerson’s inner stability. Rather, Sweetman “covers his deep sense of failure with a facade of competence and rough hewn masculinity” (Wilkinson and Taylor, 1982, p. 11). Wilkerson sees through the mask, however, and watches begrudgingly as his father deteriorates into the victim society has demanded he become. Sweetman agrees with Gaines who says that,

Despite the revolution, the Black father is in a position of non-respectability, and the white is still in control. The Black man is seldom the owner, still is not the public defender in court, not
the judge. The young Black man almost always sees a white in
these positions, not an older Black man, not his father...So the
son cannot and does not look up to the father. The father has to
look up to the son. That is not natural. And the cycle continues,
and continues. A few of our Black fathers made it, but the
majority do not—and I doubt they will in our time. (Doyle, 1995,
p. 164)

The death of Wilkerson would surely convince Sweetman
further of his paternal incompetence and his inept manhood.
Because Wilkerson is his only child, Sweetman would also be
forced to accept the demise of his entire lineage, thus seeing
Wilkerson’s death as confirmation of his theory concerning
white hegemony over Black life. Moreover, the absence of
spiritual insight on Sweetman’s part would leave him no
choice but to continue his search for manhood upon grounds
outside of himself and his own culture. Such a truth assures
Sweetman’s continued spiritual dislocation and his never-
ending obsession with proving himself to those he thinks
ultimately desire to destroy him.

In My Father’s House and The Lynchers are two ex-
tended melodies whose lyrics speak of the Black male’s frustra-
tion and agony as he attempts to find place and to create space
in America. All aforementioned characters “seek a means for
expressing the grief and terror that rage within [their souls]”
(Margolies, 1968, p. 107). Religion comforts some, but the
young are left with no song to soothe their woes, so their
burdens “sag like a heavy load” until it explodes, usually in
death. Bernard Bell (1987) contends that In My Father’s House
is Gaines’ “least compelling” creation; yet this is simply not so,
particularly if one understands, from an African-centered posi-
tion, Gaines’ gift to the Black community concerning the state
and the importance of Black father-son relationships. Both
Gaines and Wideman appear more concerned about social
constructs of manhood and their impact on black men than
they are with the literary creation of the quintessential Black
man. This is crucial to note because, otherwise, these works
might get dismissed by most literary critics because the autho-
rinal intent seems as much social commentary as literary cre-
atoin. Yet, the Afrocentric critic understands that the storytell-
ing tradition in the Black community is both a social corrective
measure and an opportunity for literary mastery. And, if these
two works are evaluated on both counts, I contend that their
worth will be valued much higher.

That “institutional racism and its machinations shape
the expression of black masculinity” (Staples, 1981, p. 2)
appears to be a premise both Wideman and Gaines accept as they assert that Black manhood is both an individual pursuit and a social prodigy. In other words, they seem to agree that it is difficult for a boy to become a man if his father or some adult male does not sanction his manhood. But this, in turn, is problematic because of “the lack of a reasonable and articulate [black] male point of view” (Staples, 1982, p. 148) that Black boys desperately need. Studies such as this one attempt to offer such a point of view. And yet these works are new and extraordinarily difficult because writers must conceptualize philosophical positioning, develop epistemological strategies, and explore literary possibilities all within the same moment. It must be done, however, for Black men are dying daily as we attempt to make tangible a manhood that we can never seem to keep. The reader’s task then is both to assess the feasibility of the current African American manhood ideal and to help distinguish spiritual modes of its acquisition in search of a wholistic definition of manhood which any Black man can enjoy, free of internal or external constraints. This insight will further the Black male search for self and self-worth and help fathers show sons an easier, more familially-beneficial route to travel as they journey toward themselves and, hence, their manhood.
References


