“Haunted by the Idea”: Fathers and Sons in *In My Father’s House* and *A Gathering of Old Men*

Daniel White

In his early works, Ernest J. Gaines focuses primarily on the young black male, tracing the growth of this character from early childhood to young adulthood. In the short story collection *Bloodline*, Gaines begins with six-year-old Sonny Howard, moves through adolescence with nineteen-year-old Procter Lewis, and in *Copper Laurent* portrays the young man. In the first two novels, *Catherine Carmier* and *Of Love and Dust*, Gaines probes deeper into the characters of his young males. Jackson Bradley from the first novel is a naive version of Copper Laurent; the second novel continues the story of Procter Lewis, whom Gaines has renamed Marcus Payne. Though the names may differ, one similarity among these characters remains: they all rebel in the face of oppression. Through their rebellious actions, which often result in violence or death, Procter, Copper, Jackson, and Marcus all become instruments of change in Gaines’s stagnant plantation world where the whites rule and the blacks fearfully submit.

The older characters, usually in the persons of the elderly aunts—Aunt Charlotte from *Catherine Carmier* and Aunt Margaret from *Of Love and Dust*, for example—seek to restrain the young rebels. They act to protect themselves and “the people” from violence, but however noble their intent, they are working also to stifle change and preserve a decadent system beyond its time.¹ This conflict between the generations continues in the third novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, in which Ned Douglass, Miss Jane’s surrogate son, and Jimmy
Aaron, whom the old people designate “the One,” their unofficial spiritual leader, both must fight not only white oppression but the fear in older blacks. However, the end of the novel marks a significant change in Gaines’s fiction. The decision of 110-year-old Jane to go into town and join a civil rights demonstration shows that the elderly in Gaines’s world may finally be realizing the necessity of rebellion. Though this ending reflects the achievements of Gaines’s blacks, an apparent union of young and old against the white oppressor, we find in the next two novels that, despite this success, other conflicts remain unresolved.

Perhaps the main reason that Gaines’s early protagonists are young males and elderly women is that these characters were inspired by his experiences before leaving Louisiana at age fifteen. Though young Gaines sometimes worked in the fields with the men, his closest ties to adults were with the older women who raised him, his Aunt Augusteen in particular.² And even after moving to California to live with his mother and stepfather, Gaines still did not develop a close father-son relationship because his stepfather was in the merchant marine and seldom at home. (Gaines does, however, credit his stepfather for getting him off the streets and into the library.) It was not until Gaines began visiting his Louisiana home that he developed close ties with older men, especially during his research for Miss Jane Pittman. Trying to get an idea of how Miss Jane would remember her life, Gaines talked with the old men still living on the plantations, spending hours on their galleries sharing their pasts. In an interview with Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooton, Gaines has said, “I think I became closer to older men when I started coming back to the South and wanted to write about things. And it seemed that older men were the ones who were there, the ones who had survived” (Porch Talk 39).

Gaines’s observations stuck with him after the completion of Miss Jane Pittman and undoubtedly led to his new protagonists—the Reverend Phillip J. Martin of In My Father’s House and Mathu, Chimley, Coot, Uncle Billy, and all the other old-timers in A Gathering of Old Men.

The shift in focus from the young male rebel to the mature and aging man does not indicate a change in philosophy. Rather, Gaines is using new knowledge to approach an old theme—the separation of fathers and sons. Throughout Gaines’s earlier works, we see this separation from the point of view of sons without fathers. In “Three Men” Procter Lewis, abandoned by his father, finds a substitute in Munford Bazille,
the old convict. Copper Laurent from “Bloodline” will never find a father because he was the product of a white man’s lust. Marcus Payne from Of Love and Dust is Procter Lewis without a Munford Bazille. The list goes on, but perhaps the best example is young James in “The Sky Is Gray.” In his journey of initiation, he encounters many of the symbols and practices of small-town Southern racism, but the void left by his missing father is the root of his greatest hardships. As Valerie Babb has noted in her book Ernest Gaines, “the psychic state of Gaines’s male characters is a direct result of paternal presence or absence” (98). Most often, this state is the result of absence.

In an interview with Mary Ellen Doyle, Gaines has explained that the rift between black fathers and sons originated with slavery:

The father and son were separated when they were brought to this country over three centuries ago. The white man did not let them come together during slavery, and they have not been able to reach each other since. 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, and continues. A few of our black fathers make it, but the majority do not—and I doubt they will in our time. (“MELUS Interview” 73)

According to Gaines, the problems between black fathers and sons originated with white slave owners who literally separated father from son by breaking up families to put individual slaves on the auction block. And despite the civil rights movement, black fathers have not totally rejected submission, and they have not attained positions of power in white as well as black society. Black fathers must acquire this power before they can regain the respect of their sons, a prerequisite for reunification. Gaines presents an in-depth exploration of these ideas with In My Father’s House, which focuses on a father. “It is a book I had to write,” he has said, “because I was haunted by the idea [of the separation of black fathers and sons]. It cost me more time (seven years) and pain than any other book I’ve written” (Doyle, “MELUS Interview” 72).

One reason that Gaines may have devoted so much energy to finishing...
In My Father's House is that he had experienced life without a father. The head of Gaines's household when he was a child was a woman, as is true of many black families in America today. After the separation of Gaines's parents, his father moved to New Orleans. According to Gaines, "He was never there when I was a kid growing up. He was there when I was a very small child, but not after I was on my own. From the moment I was on my own, which was when I was about eight years old, he was not there" (Gaudet and Wooton, Porch Talk 62). The struggle to complete In My Father's House probably reflects Gaines's struggle to come to an understanding of his own father's absence. Other black male writers have faced similar experiences. Ralph Ellison was three years old when his father died; Richard Wright was the same age when his father deserted the family; and James Baldwin was born to an unmarried woman and never had a father, only a stepfather, with whom he had an ambivalent relationship. In Black Boy, Wright expresses rage at his father for leaving the family to face the hardships of poverty and hunger. Baldwin's novel Go Tell It on the Mountain, which at one point was entitled "In My Father's House," shares more than a working title with Gaines's novel. It contains Baldwin's own attempt to work through the problems of a failed relationship with his father. In Gaines's In My Father's House, the author consciously set out to explore his ideas about the split between black fathers and sons. In focusing on a mature black father in this novel and on elderly fathers in A Gathering, Gaines is able to draw from a large pool of black male experience. He uses this range of experience to illustrate how black fathers and sons have become separated and why they have had limited success in reuniting.

In My Father's House opens at Virginia Colar's boardinghouse, where a mysterious young man calling himself Robert X has just arrived. Once settled in, he fishes for information about the Reverend Phillip J. Martin, pastor of Solid Rock Baptist Church and the civil rights leader of St. Adrienne, Louisiana (which Gaines calls Bayonne in other books). But once Robert X gets his information, he spends all of his time walking in the cold winter rain and lingering in the road in front of Martin's house and in the doorway of his church. Out of curiosity, Elijah, a young teacher who lives with Martin and his family, invites Robert X to a party at the minister's house. There Martin rallies his followers for their planned demonstrations against Albert Chenal, the largest employer in town and the least moved by the idea of civil rights. When Martin sees
Robert X and realizes the young man’s identity, he falls to the floor, then allows his white advisors to tell his people that he has collapsed from exhaustion. For the next few days, Martin, confiding in no one, agonizes over his weakness at the party but primarily over his weakness twenty-one years earlier when he abandoned Johanna Rey, the woman he loved, and their three children. And he agonizes because he cannot remember the given name of his oldest son—who has taken the name Robert X.

In revealing Martin’s secret past, Gaines shifts his focus from the enigmatic stranger to the celebrated father. If it were not for the eerie presence of Robert X, we might, in the beginning, be lulled into thinking that Gaines is presenting a celebration of the civil rights movement and of a dynamic leader. Robert X hears only praise of Phillip Martin. Virginia proudly recites Martin’s accomplishments and expresses the community’s desire to see him elected to Congress: “People thinking ’bout sending him on to Washington. Would be the first one from round here, you know” (10). Elijah calls the reverend “our Martin Luther King” because of “his leadership, political and moral. His character” (16). “The man’s beautiful, so much courage” (20), says Beverly Ricord, a young teacher. Her boyfriend Shepherd, also a teacher, dubs the reverend “King Martin” (30). And when Gaines finally introduces us to the imposing presence of Phillip J. Martin, we could easily believe that the man deserves his renown. Though sixty years old, Martin is a model of power and virility, often being compared to a prizefighter. He stands over six feet tall, weighs around two hundred pounds, and has “thick black hair” and a “thick well-trimmed mustache” (34). Because of his age and his leadership abilities, Martin may at first appear to be an ideal father figure, something missing in any form from Gaines’s previous works. The presence of such a mature role model, a respectable elder statesman in the black community, could perhaps suggest the achievement of some sense of normality, and perhaps many observers wanted to believe that civil rights did indeed establish a greater degree of normality.

However, Gaines suggests that one decade’s worth of political and social reforms did not and could not repair the damage of more than one-hundred years of slavery and oppression. As evidence, he presents Robert X and the young teachers. Robert X, with his terse, abrasive, cryptic comments, supplies the first indications that Phillip Martin may
not be the savior his followers believe him to be. When Virginia boasts of her minister’s accomplishments, Robert X cuts her off: “It sounded from the tone of his voice that he didn’t believe what she was saying” (10). The young man’s skepticism is less subtle in response to Elijah’s tribute to Martin’s superior character: “His character? . . . Do you ever know a man’s character?” (16). The teachers, the only other young people we see, wallow in fear and self-pity, spending every evening in the Congo Room drinking themselves into a collective stupor. Even Beverly, who applauds Martin’s courage, admits she has none of her own: “I think it’s a shame. . . . We being the teachers, we ought to be the ones out there in front” (21). Chuck answers with all of the bitterness and cynicism of the post-Martin Luther King young: “That shit’s over with kiddo. Them honkies gave up some, because of conscience, because of God. But they ain’t giving up no more. Nigger’s already got just about everything he’s getting out of this little town. Anything else he want he better go look somewhere else for it” (21). Gaines ends the discussion tersely: “The bartender brought the bottle” (21). Thus, the cycle of despair and drunkenness continues. But nothing could be more damning than Robert X himself, a twenty-seven-year-old exoskeleton. He represents the future—all the hopes and aspirations of the movement. Yet he has received no inspiration from the leaders and only pain from the great father figure—the Reverend Phillip J. Martin—his flesh-and-blood father. “My soul is sick,” he says, comparing it to the piles of garbage in the alley below his boarding-house window: “Used to be something good in them bottles, in them cans. . . . Somebody went through lot of pain making them bottles round—red and green. Look at them now. Busted. Cans bent and rusted. Nothing but trash. Nothing but trash now” (27). Despite Martin’s civil rights demonstrations, he will never be able to restore the “something good” he destroyed when, twenty-one years earlier, he discarded his eldest son like one of the bottles in that alley.

Although Phillip Martin seems an ideal father figure, someone that a son should respect, some of the details of his position reflect a disturbing weakness. First, he is still only a preacher in a local church. The talk of his becoming a U.S. Congressman would probably be a fantasy even without the appearance of Robert X; St. Adrienne is, after all, a tiny constituency. Furthermore, Martin must depend on two white allies, one of whom is a lawyer. Deacon Howard Mills, speaking to
Jonathan Robillard, Martin’s suspicious assistant pastor, defends these associations by saying, “We ain’t got no black attorney round here who can do what Anthony can do. And Octave’s the only friend we have on the board of education” (33). Of course, whites and blacks working together is an accomplishment in itself, but here the whites are still the only ones with positions of any real power. Frank Shelton observes that Martin’s character fits into Gaines’s “pattern of classical tragedy” and points out the tragic flaws of pride and selfishness—“ego gratification”—that afflict the reverend and his lieutenants (“In My Father’s House” 343). Martin is no Oedipus, for his flaws are numerous. Though as a minister he is supposed to be a humble servant of God, Martin, like the intolerant preacher in “The Sky Is Gray,” loves material things. His house is “the most expensive and elegant owned by a black family in St. Adrienne” (28). In the driveway of his beautifully landscaped yard sit his “big Chrysler” and his wife’s station wagon (28). He wears expensive clothes, and Shepherd notices his showy jewelry—“the two big rings on his fingers and the gold watch band round his wrist” that “sparkled in the light” (35).

Even if Martin’s character flaws could somehow escape the attention of Robert X, the older man’s actions, past and present, still would probably preclude any feelings of respect in his son. Twenty-one years earlier, Phillip Martin had the chance to be a husband, a father, a man. But by not standing up and going to his family, by staying in the bed of a woman for whom he cared nothing, Phillip chose to live the way whites expected black men to live—as something subhuman, not guided by reason or normal emotions. When Phillip accepted this definition of his status, he had license to act as a brute—to indulge his lusts and shun the responsibilities of fatherhood. As he admits, “I was an animal before I was Reverend Phillip J. Martin” (211).

Years later Martin discovered God. He was converted, eventually using his pulpit to fight for reform. And he took a young wife and started a new family. He accomplished many things for his people and earned respectability for himself, but these feats do not, as Martin has believed, compensate for deserting his son. The fragility of his self-deception becomes apparent when, preparing for the biggest demonstration of his life, he receives a second chance to claim his son and fails pathetically.

When Martin faints at the party after recognizing that the uninvited guest Robert X is his son, he makes a few feeble efforts to rise from the
floor. But instead of standing, Martin allows Octave Bacheron’s “small white hand” to keep him on the floor. Instead of explaining his fall, Martin babbles gibberish: “Don’t let me deny him again” (41). Doom-ing himself further, Martin allows Bacheron and Anthony to tell the people that he fell because of exhaustion, and the two white men “made him lean on them” as they put him to bed (42). Martin then broods constantly over his mistakes, especially this latest one: “Why didn’t he knock that white man’s hand away from his chest? He could have done it easily as flicking away a fly. Wouldn’t that have been the right thing for him to do—brushing away that white man’s hand and getting to his feet? Being leader, wasn’t that the thing to do? If not the leader, who then? Who? But no, like some cowardly frightened little nigger, he lay there and let them do all the talking for him. He even let them push pills down in his mouth” (54–55). Martin realizes that he should have stood and asserted his independence by acknowledging the presence of his son, so he laments his weakness and his dependence upon his two white allies. All of this self-torture inevitably leads 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.

However, we can already see where he has erred. Giving to the community is not the same as giving to a son. Other characters in Gaines’s works give of themselves and achieve real nobility—Munford Bazille, Jim Kelley in *Of Love and Dust*, and Jane Pittman—but these people do not have their own children. Miss Jane, with her relationship to Ned, comes closest, but she is a mother figure, not a father. Even without natural children, these characters act on the need to establish what Erik Erikson terms *generativity*, which is “the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation” (*Identity* 138). To achieve generativity, the individual must move beyond personal needs and take steps to ensure that successive generations have a hopeful future.

As Todd Duncan has shown in discussing *Bloodline*, Erikson’s theories on human development—the “eight ages of man” in particular—provide an enlightening context in which to explore Gaines’s fiction. With the progression from six-year-old Sonny to the death of elderly Aunt Fe, *Bloodline* is largely a depiction of the human life cycle. Gaines has said that he wrote and arranged the stories with this end in mind (Ingram and Steinberg 341–42). Gaines’s two novels under discussion here similarly lend themselves to interpretation based on Erikson’s ideas.
because the characters’ problems parallel the eight crises, each of which must be resolved for the individual to mature and then face death with courage and dignity.3

Phillip Martin, like Jane, Munford, and Jim (who have no children of their own), tries to achieve generativity through “other forms of altruistic concern and creativity which may absorb . . . parental drive” (Erikson, Identity 138). For Jane and the others, this substitution is not overly drastic, as they become substitute parents to Gaines’s young, fatherless rebels. Martin’s civil rights work, on the other hand, reflects a complete departure from parenthood, which is especially significant because he does have children of his own. Even his ties to his St. Adrienne family are tenuous; the narrative never portrays Martin with these children. And the complaints of his lawful wife Alma suggest that Martin has stumbled in a previous developmental stage, the one Erikson calls “intimacy—which is . . . a counterpointing as well as a fusing of identities” (Identity 135). Alma senses the distance between herself and her husband, finally telling him, “You come to me for this bed, for nothing else” (134). With his failures as a father and a husband plaguing his every thought, Martin questions even his role as a civil rights leader: “Lately I’ve been having my doubts. . . . If you not reaching the young, what good you doing?” (58). Thus, Martin’s failures as a father merge with his failures as a leader.

Finally deciding that he must reach out to his son, the minister sacrifices the march against Chenal to get Robert X out of jail, a move that produces unfortunate consequences. Robert X is unimpressed, especially since his father still refuses to accept personal responsibility for the results of his desertion. Instead, Phillip Martin blames “that world out there” for Robert X’s pain (100). He cannot even remember Robert X’s real name. It bears mentioning here that Robert X’s chosen name parallels that of Malcolm X, while Phillip Martin’s surname and his activism have echoes of Martin Luther King, Jr. By renaming himself, Robert X apparently repudiates his father and his father’s King-inspired ideals. He comes to St. Adrienne seemingly as a son of Malcolm X and his more militant vision. Certainly Robert X’s rejection of his father includes a promise of violence. With mixed pain and hatred, the son walks away from the father—but not before telling Phillip that he is going to kill him. Returning home, Martin finds that word of his deal with the sheriff has reached the members of the civil rights committee, who promptly
oust him as president in favor of pretentious, overly ambitious Jonathan Robillard.

With the future of his committee looking bleak and his own survival in doubt, Martin journeys into his past, searching for some kind of redemption. One of his goals on this quest is to talk with his old friend Chippo Simon, who has recently seen Johanna in California. But first the search leads Martin into the roadhouses and juke joints of his youth, where he confronts his past sins and the universality of his problem. Sexy seductress Adeline Toussaint represents Phillip’s lusty past; it was his irresponsible appetite for sex that led him away from his first family. And when Martin meets Billy, a young radical, he learns the extent of the failure of black fathers. Billy asserts that blacks must join together for one day and burn the country to the ground: “Burn it down, you destroy Western Civilization. You put the world back right—let it start all over again” (162). Sensing a source of the young rebel’s anger, Martin asks Billy about his father. The young man replies that their relationship is “bout average. . . . I don’t bother him, he don’t bother me” (165). Through Billy’s bitterness, Phillip realizes as truth what he had been suspecting: “Then the civil rights movement didn’t bring us together at all?” (166). Martin sees that civil rights may have improved relations between blacks and whites but that black father-and-son relationships remain unaffected because of lack of communication. Gaines has addressed this point directly in an interview: “Sitting at a counter with whites does not bring father and son together. Just because they are sitting there does not mean they are communicating” (Doyle, “MELUS Interview” 73).

From Chippo, Phillip finally learns the extent of the damage caused by his abandonment. Johanna, always hoping that Phillip would return to her, would not establish a permanent relationship with another man. Instead she had a series of brief affairs: “Never one too long,” says Chippo. “Two, three months, then he had to go. . . . She let them know that from the start. Number one was still in Louisiana” (195). So not just the son has suffered; the mother also has been scarred. Phillip’s desertion left her incapable of establishing intimacy with another man. Therefore no one ever assumed the role of father to the children. Johanna’s last lover, a scoundrel named Quick George, turned his attentions to the daughter, savagely beating and raping her. The youngest boy, Antoine, demanded that Etienne (Robert X) shoot the rapist, but Etienne refused to take
such action. So Antoine killed Quick George himself. “But now he was the man,” says Chippo, “and he let Etienne know it” (198). Robert X’s shame emasculated him. Yet the responsibility for the boy’s pain and for the destruction of the family belongs to Phillip Martin. Martin realizes that if he had lived up to his family obligations, neither of his sons would have had to carry the burden of manhood that was prematurely unloaded on Robert X the day Phillip deserted them. The conversation with Chippo also verifies that his son does indeed plan to kill him. During Chippo’s visit, Robert X discovered his father’s whereabouts and decided to seek revenge—with Johanna’s money and her blessings.

Robert X’s vengeance, however, comes about differently from the way he had planned it. While Phillip’s visit with Chippo continues, Alma, Beverly, and Shepherd arrive with the news that Robert X has jumped from the “trestle over Big Man Bayou” (203). Realizing that killing his father would not restore his manhood, the young man destroyed himself, ironically in the waters of “Big Man” Bayou. A bullet from Robert X’s gun could not have hurt Martin as much as this news because he was hoping that what he learned from Chippo would help him move closer to his son. Now Robert X is lost forever.

But is Phillip Martin also lost? Gaines offers two different answers to this question as the novel concludes. Already drunk and now angry and wounded because of Robert X’s suicide, Martin wants to rush back into the sins of the past, to Adeline’s waiting bed, but settles for a brawl with Chippo and a reluctant Shepherd, who stop him from leaving. The result is a standoff, leaving Phillip with no easy outlet for his frustration. He feels beaten, and Gaines uses the image of a defeated boxer to describe him. Phillip surrenders, casting off his faith in God and everything else. Beverly, however, offers a different perspective. Once ashamed of her own timidity in comparison to Martin’s strength, she now tries to give him courage. She reminds Martin that he has a son at home, Patrick, who needs a father’s attention: “You wanted the past changed, Reverend Martin. . . . Even He can’t do that. So that leaves nothing but the future. We work toward the future. To keep Patrick from going to that trestle. One day I’ll have a son, and what we do tomorrow might keep him from going to that trestle. That’s all we can ever hope for, isn’t it, Reverend Martin?” (213). Beverly believes that the minister’s painful experience with Etienne will give him the courage and the wisdom to forge a strong relationship with Patrick. But Beverly’s hopeful
words do not immediately reassure Phillip. "I'm lost," he tells his wife, Alma. "Shhh," she responds. "Shhh. We just go’n have to start again." The novel ends with these words, and we are left wondering whom to believe, the despairing Phillip Martin or the two optimistic women.

In a review of *In My Father's House*, Alvin Aubert sees the ending positively—"a reconciliation of past and present, of private and public man" ("Self-Reintegration" 133). Such a statement may seem overly optimistic, given Phillip Martin’s state of mind. But the possibility does remain open for him to go back home and become a real father to Patrick, the kind of father of whom the boy can be proud. Gaines allows Alma to have the last say in the novel, and her strong words suggest that Phillip has, indeed, been given a second chance at fatherhood and that he will take advantage of this opportunity to "start over" in his relationship with Patrick. Patrick, in turn, may then be a good father to his own sons. And perhaps the future sons of Beverly and Shepherd will be able to know and respect their father; after all, Gaines chooses the young couple over everyone else to accompany Alma and share in Martin’s experience. As is typical in Gaines’s work, a tragedy eases the way for the slow but steady advance of progress.

This progress is not apparent at the beginning of *A Gathering*, which Gaines sets a few years beyond the end of *In My Father’s House*. As the novel develops, however, we find more reason to be hopeful about Gaines’s fathers and sons than ever before. For the setting of this novel, Gaines returns to the Louisiana plantation world that he captures so effectively in his earlier works. Most of the action in *A Gathering* takes place in the quarters of the Marshall plantation, where Beau Boutan, a Cajun farmer, has been shot and killed on a hot day in the late 1970s. Before calling the sheriff, young Candy Marshall, owner of the plantation, summons all willing black men to come to Mathu’s house—where Boutan lies dead—with a twelve-gauge shotgun and an empty number five shell. When Sheriff Mapes arrives, he finds something that he never would have believed—a crowd of blacks in Mathu’s yard and on his gallery, including close to twenty old men with shotguns, each claiming that he pulled the trigger on Boutan. Even Candy Marshall claims responsibility. But Mapes believes that Mathu is the only one with courage enough to have shot Boutan, and he tries to force a couple of the old blacks to confirm his supposition by slapping them around. They will not budge. Meanwhile, everyone waits for Fix Boutan, the dead man’s
father and a notorious vigilante, to ride in with his family and friends to avenge his son's death. But lacking the support of two of his sons, the old Cajun stays home. Then, in a surprise ending, all of the characters—black and white—learn something new about each other and about themselves.

The lives of the blacks still on the plantation tell us much about the lives of all blacks, including the state of father-and-son relationships. As the plantation system has deteriorated, the young adults have moved to the cities seeking opportunity. The elderly people have stayed behind to live out their lives and to raise the grandchildren left behind. The fact that children have been left to be raised by grandparents suggests that much remains to be done in bringing fathers and sons together. The old men on the plantation are clearly separated from their sons, geographically as well as emotionally. Some of them have also lost sons to racial violence. The only father-son relationship that we ever see on the plantation is that between Mathu and Charlie, but Mathu is actually Charlie's parrain, or godfather, not his biological father.

These old fathers have done nothing in the past to acquire the respectability that Gaines believes is necessary for a man to become a strong father figure. On the contrary, they have done everything possible to avoid conflict and remain invisible, primarily because of fear. They have allowed the white people's violence to intimidate them into complete submission. They have no respect for themselves. Therefore, their sons could not possibly respect them either. The old men are aware of their cowardice, and they burn with bitterness and shame.

A lifetime's worth of these pent-up emotions suddenly erupts in the stories the old men tell while gathered at Mathu's house. The story most relevant to this discussion is Gable's. Fighting back tears, he recounts his sixteen-year-old son's execution. Like Tom Robinson in To Kill a Mockingbird, Gable's son was accused and convicted of raping a white woman although he was obviously innocent. Everyone knew that if the boy did have sex with her, she must have seduced him. Gable still agonizes over failing his son all those years ago:

And what did I do about them killing my boy like that? What could a poor old nigger do but go up to the white folks and fall down on his knees? But, no, no pity coming there. Some went so far to say my boy shoulda been glad he died in the 'lectric chair 'stead at the end of a rope. They said
at least he was treated like a white man. And it was best we just forgot all about it and him.

But I never forgot, I never forgot. It’s been over forty years now, but every day of my life, every night of my life, I go through that rainy day again.

And that’s why I kilt Beau, Mr. Sheriff. . . . He was just like that trashy white gal. He was just like them who throwed my boy in that ‘lectric chair and pulled that switch. (102)

Gable’s narrative reveals that Beau, along with the rest of the Boutan family, has become a symbol of all the cruelty and injustice that Gable and the other blacks have endured throughout their lives. So Gable, like all the other old men, confesses to killing Beau Boutan as a means of regaining his lost manhood. His confession is an attempt to reach out to his dead son and in some way exact justice.

We can never know if Phillip Martin takes advantage of his second chance, but the old men of A Gathering, though clearly frightened, welcome theirs and decide to stand with Mathu against Sheriff Mapes and the Boutans. Mat sees this opportunity as a gift from God: “He works in mysterious ways. . . . Give a old nigger like me one more chance to do something with his life. He gave me that chance, and I’m taking it, I’m going to Marshall. Even if I have to die at Marshall” (38). In an interview, Gaines has echoed his characters by stating that the crisis at Marshall is “God giving them a second chance to stand up one day” (Doyle, “MELUS Interview” 76). Whether or not this opportunity reveals divine intervention, Erikson’s theory about the final stage of life helps to show that the old men’s willingness to sacrifice their lives is not merely senile foolishness but a natural response to their developmental crisis.

The successful resolution of this final crisis—ego integrity versus despair—is essential to the individual and to his children. Erikson defines ego integrity in part as the “acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions” (Identity 139). When the individual approaches his death, he must be at peace with himself and satisfied with his life. The flip side of ego integrity is despair, the sense “that time is short, too short for the attempt to start another life and to try out alternative roads to integrity” (Identity 140). The old people gathered at Marshall, continually haunted by their past cowardice, have certainly been leaning more toward despair than
toward integrity. An early speech by Mat to his wife epitomizes this feeling: “The years I done stood out in that back yard and cussed at God, . . . the times I done come home drunk and beat you for no reason at all—and, woman, you still don’t know what’s the matter with me?” (38). What is wrong with Mat is despair, but the gathering provides him and his friends with that little extra time they need to travel one of what Erikson calls the “alternative roads to integrity.” To achieve that goal, the men must regain what has been taken from them—their manhood. Without it, they cannot be at peace with themselves, nor can they be good fathers. Before they can be fathers, they must first be men. Despair involves the fear of death, but with ego integrity, the individual faces death with dignity and courage. In doing so, he sets an example for his children to follow. Erikson says that “healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death” (Childhood 269). Gaines’s old men set such an example for young Toddy and Snookum.

The day’s events have a significant effect upon these children, as we can see by looking at how Snookum changes. In narrating the first section of the novel, he comes across as a somewhat timid little boy with a limited awareness of the world around him. He gets angry with Toddy for laughing at him but does not do or say anything because he fears that Toddy will tattle on him for “playing mama and papa” with Minnie (3). When he runs off to call the people to Mathu’s house, as Candy asks him to do, he goes by Mathu’s himself and sees Beau’s body on the ground. He notes that something strange is happening, but he has no idea how important this day will be. Nevertheless, Snookum sets the events in motion by rounding up the people of the quarters. Later in the day he witnesses the old men’s newfound courage and emulates them. He even speaks up to Mapes and tells the sheriff to arrest him, too: “I don’t know about Toddy, but I’m ready to go. . . . Wish I was just a little older so I coulda shot [Beau]” (109). When Mapes tries to trick him into admitting that he called everyone to Mathu’s house, Snookum does not fall for the ploy: “I ain’t got no more to say. . . . You can beat me with a hose pipe if you want” (109). He may not know precisely why he is standing up to the sheriff, but he is acting courageously nonetheless—because he has seen the old men acting courageously. This Snookum is not the little boy who was afraid of his brother’s tiny revenge just a few hours earlier.

At the same time, though, we have one father-and-son relationship
that seems to defy the idea that a father figure’s courage transfers to the son. Mathu’s manhood has never been doubted by anyone, black or white. And unlike Phillip Martin, Mathu has not shied away from his responsibilities. Yet Charlie apparently has learned nothing through his parrain’s example. Charlie is unusually big and strong, and Lou Dimes, Candy’s boyfriend, describes him as “the quintessence of . . . the super, big buck nigger” (186). Ironically, Charlie has never performed one manly act in his life. Unlike Mathu, Charlie runs from trouble and allows himself to be abused by blacks and whites alike. After Charlie has returned and revealed himself to be the true killer of Beau Boutan, he says that he knows Mathu was trying to make a man of him by beating him: “I’m fifty now, and I’m sure I musta run when I was no more than five, ’cause I know Parrain was beating me for running when I was six. ’Cause I can remember the first time he beat me for running. You remember the first time you beat me for running, Parrain? That time Ed-de took my ’taro on my way to school?” (188). Charlie may not have realized Mathu’s intentions at the time, however. Beating is not communicating; in fact, beating would seem to destroy communication. In “The Sky Is Gray,” James’s mother beats him because he does not want to kill his redbirds, and James understands her motives only after his aunt explains them to him. In this story, Gaines implies that communication cannot be established through force. Therefore, communication between sons and fathers has to be based on something more than manhood and power. Compassion and mutual respect are also important.

In the past, Mathu has had little compassion and no respect for anyone. When he addresses the old men assembled in his house, he tells them: “I ain’t nothing but a mean, bitter old man. . . . No hero. Lord—no hero. A mean, bitter old man. Hating them out there on that river, hating y’all here in the quarters. Put myself above all—proud to be African. You know why proud to be African? ’Cause they won’t let me be a citizen here in this country. Hate them ’cause they won’t let me be a citizen, hated y’all ’cause you never tried. Just a mean-hearted old man. All I ever been, till this hour” (182). Though Mathu retained his manhood by standing up for himself against Fix Boutan and other whites, he lost something else along the way. Bitterness and hate took away most of his capacity to feel and express affection for other people, including Charlie. Mathu’s perpetual anger kept him from tempering authority with understanding, though he always acted in Charlie’s best interests.
But this watershed day on the Marshall plantation offers Mathu a second chance, too. “I been changed,” he tells the other old men. “I been changed by y’all. Rooster, Clabber, Dirty Red, Coot—you changed this hardhearted old man” (182). Thus the old men’s stand produces yet another transformation. Mathu is so touched by his newfound allies’ standing up for him that he rediscovers the part of his heart that had been taken over by hate.

This change in Mathu coincides with a change in Charlie, who returns just as Mathu is preparing to give himself up to Mapes. Charlie reveals that while working in the field earlier that day, he decided he had taken enough abuse from Beau Boutan: “I was doing my work good. Cussed me anyhow. . . . I told him no, I wasn’t go’n ’low that no more, ’cause I was fifty years old—half a hundred” (190). After fifty years of being a boy, Charlie finally decided that the time had come for him to stand up and be a man. But his conversion remained tentative. After hitting Beau with a stalk of cane, he ran, and he wanted to run again when Beau came after him with a shotgun, but Mathu stopped him with threats of his own. After steadying himself and shooting Boutan, Charlie ran again, leaving his parrain to assume responsibility for the killing. However, Charlie finds that he cannot escape this time: “Something like a wall, a wall I couldn’t see. . . . stopped me every time” (192). Keith E. Byerman writes that Charlie’s “nascent manhood . . . prevents him from escaping” (“Ernest Gaines” 95). As we have seen in In My Father’s House and other works by Gaines, accepting responsibility for one’s actions is an essential part of becoming a man. Charlie’s emerging manhood thus leads him back to the quarters.

When Charlie asserts his manhood for the first time, he and Mathu move closer together emotionally. Charlie wishes to be called “Mister. Mr. Biggs,” as a symbolic affirmation of his manhood (187). Sheriff Mapes willingly agrees: “At this point, anything you say . . . Mr. Biggs. That goes for the rest of y’all around here” (187). For all his faults, Mapes respects a man, and suddenly he realizes that he is surrounded by men. According to John F. Callahan, Mapes has freed himself from the “social and psychological conventions” of his white society in accepting Charlie and the others as men (“One Day” 39). As sheriff, Mapes serves as a strong representative of this white society, and his recognition of Charlie’s manhood places the black man in a position of respectability for all of those in the room to witness. Throughout the scene
Mathu is obviously pleased with the new Charlie: “Mathu was looking at him as though he was not absolutely sure he was seeing him there. He nodded his head” (188). And Charlie acknowledges that he understands Mathu’s treatment of him: “You tried to make me a man, didn’t you, Parrain? Didn’t you?” (189). The two men now understand and respect each other as they communicate across the crowded room. Thus we have the beginnings of a better kind of father-and-son relationship. But at eighty-two Mathu is nearing the end of his life, and Charlie will die before the novel ends. So for their relationship to have any lasting meaning, they must make an impression upon the children, specifically upon Snookum and Toddy. Snookum is present in the room, and he wants to hear every word Charlie says. When he goes to get ice water for Mapes, Snookum says, “Don’t start till I get back, hear, Charlie?” (187). Charlie drinks some of Snookum’s water before he tells his story. As he relates the story and day passes into night, Charlie becomes a father figure himself.

Though Charlie has already demonstrated his manhood to Mathu, Mapes, and the old men, he has to pass one more test before his legacy to the next generation is complete. Luke Will and his gang of rednecks, who represent an ugly past that is too ignorant to die out, are determined to avenge Beau’s death. In discussing the novel’s ending, Gaines has said, “I still believe in the old Chekovian idea that if the gun is over the mantle at the beginning of the play, the gun must go off by the time the curtain comes down. And I thought that the only way the gun could go off in my book was Charlie and Luke Will out on the street shooting at each other” (Gaudet and Wooton 97). Indeed, many guns go off as Luke Will and the rednecks shoot it out with Charlie and the old black men, who have been anticipating such an opportunity to unleash their anger against their white oppressors. While the old men become warriors, Charlie becomes a general. Even Luke Will soon realizes that Charlie controls the situation: “Mapes ain’t in charge no more. . . . Charlie is. We got to deal with Charlie now” (206). Charlie has become an intimidating presence to the white men, just as they have always been to the blacks. Through this reversal in power, Charlie gains even more respect for himself. And even though he and Luke Will destroy each other in the gunfight, Charlie retains—perhaps enhances—his status. His death makes him a hero and a martyr. All the men touch Charlie’s body, “hoping that some of that stuff he had found back there in the
swamps might rub off” (210). Most importantly, the children come to Charlie: “Glo told her grandchildren they must touch him, too” (210). This inverse laying on of hands symbolizes how the children will carry on what Charlie has started.

Gaines presents a similar ritual in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. When Ned Douglass is murdered for teaching the black people to stand up for their rights, his body becomes something sacred as well: “They wanted to touch his body, they wanted to help take it inside. The road was full, people coming from everywhere. They wanted to touch his body. When they couldn’t touch his body they took lumber from the wagon. They wanted a piece of lumber with his blood on it” (116). James R. Giles and Albert Wertheim both point out that Ned’s death parallels Christ’s crucifixion. The people even build a little shrine out of Ned’s gravesite to commemorate the tragedy. According to Jane, “It is for the children of this parish and this State. Black and white, we don’t care. We want them to know a black man died many years ago for them. He died at the end of the other century and the beginning of this century. He shed his precious blood for them” (113). Jane’s assertion of the inspirational nature of this monument suggests the impact of Ned’s death on future generations. In comparison, Charlie’s death may not be loaded with the Biblical significance of Ned’s murder, but the people’s reactions to both imply that they will have a similar impact on the future. The memory of Charlie Biggs will serve as a source of strength for Snookum and Toddy. Perhaps this strength will help them to become good fathers someday. The hope in this possibility recalls the hope expressed by Beverly at the end of *In My Father’s House* when she tells Phillip Martin to go back home and work to be a better father to Patrick so that no more sons will be “going to that trestle” (213).

While Gaines’s black fathers and sons seem to be making progress, their white counterparts are growing apart. The white fathers cling to the past and the established codes of behavior and remain inflexible when their sons wish to move forward. We first see this conflict between Robert and Tee Bob Samson in *Miss Jane Pittman*. Tee Bob’s love for a Creole girl violates the age-old code that prohibits such feelings between the races, a code upheld by Robert Samson. Unable to escape the confinement of tradition, Tee Bob commits suicide, and Robert Samson loses his son forever. In *A Gathering*, a similar conflict develops between Fix Boutan and his son Gil. Gil, however, is stronger than Tee Bob and manages to stand up to the past and to his father.
Gil Boutan represents the future of the white man of Louisiana. As a star running back for the LSU Tigers, he shares the backfield with Cal Harrison, a black, and the two are good friends. Gil and Cal represent a hopeful vision in which the races work together to achieve shared goals. "On the gridiron they depended on each other the way one hand must depend on the other swinging a baseball bat," says Sully, their friend and teammate (115). Gil has found that cooperation leads to success, but he is also aware that his partnership with Cal has meaning beyond the playing field, as is evident in his desire to see both of them named All-Americans. He wants to set an example of racial cooperation for the South and the entire country to see. But unless Gil can reason with his father and keep the old Cajun away from Marshall, his dream may be finished.

Reason, however, will not prevail, because Gil and Fix have so diverged that they can no longer communicate with each other. Gil struggles in vain to explain his feelings to his father: "Papa, I'm not putting things right. . . . But do you understand what I'm trying to say? Do you understand, Papa?" (138). Fix does not understand. While Mathu responds to Charlie's new assertiveness with pride, Fix's reaction to Gil is hostile. Fix sees Gil as betraying the family: "Your brother's honor for the sake to play football side by side with the niggers—is that so?" (142). Fix's ideas are mired in the past, and he communicates better with Beau's friend Luke Will than with his own son. Nevertheless, Gil continues to try to reach his father. He tries to tell him that the world no longer tolerates vigilantes: "Those days when you just take the law in your own hands—those days are gone. These are the '70s, soon to be the '80s. Not the '20s, the '30s, or the '40s. People died—people we knew—died to change those things. Those days are gone forever, I hope" (143). Fix hears but does not listen. His failure to communicate with his son suggests a failure in his attempts to achieve the developmental stage of generativity. Instead of guiding Gil toward his destiny as an athletic hero, Fix blindly, selfishly pushes for Gil's involvement in violent actions that would destroy the boy's future. Fix can speak only of "family responsibility" (143), and indeed he does care deeply about family, as we see in the loving way he holds Beau's young son. However, his love for family has been distorted by racial hatred, and his idea of "family responsibility" is really irresponsibility. By going after Charlie with a shotgun, Beau brought on his own death, and as we have seen already, in Gaines's fiction a character must accept the consequences of
his actions. So the responsible thing for the family to do is to mourn Beau's death and, rather than seeking to punish scapegoats, learn something that will help them avoid such grief in the future. Fix, however, has learned nothing. He disowns Gil, tells him he never wants to see him again, and orders him to leave the house at once. Thus the breakdown of communication leads to this ultimate separation of father and son.

The disintegration of Gil's relationship with his father greatly upsets the young man, but with the guidance of Deputy Russell, Gil realizes the need to look to the future of the Boutan family. Gil Boutan's developmental crisis is that of "identity vs. role confusion," the resolution of which results in an individual's establishing his place in the adult world (Erikson, *Childhood* 261–63). Gil's future identity depends upon his continuing to work with Cal to achieve success on the gridiron. Russell, apparently speaking for Gaines, advises Gil that the best way to help his family is to play in the big game the next day: "You want to do something for your dead brother? Do something for his son's future—play in that game tomorrow. Whether you win against Ole Miss or not, you'll beat Luke Will. Because if you don't, he'll win tomorrow, and if he does, he may just keep on winning. That's not much of a future for Tee Beau, is it?" (151). Because of Gil's athletic achievements, he has become a hero to the people on the bayou. Parents want their children to grow up to be like Gil Boutan, and the children adore him. If he lets his problems with Fix keep him out of the game, he will lose much—if not all—of the admiration and respect he has gained, and the children will lose a role model. However, by playing in the game and working with Cal, Gil will prove his strength in the face of adversity and establish himself as a father figure to his dead brother's son. He is certain to have a more positive influence on the boy than Beau would have had.

In comparing what Gaines has to say about black and white fathers and sons, we see two opposing ideas. The blacks, separated because of slavery, are striving to come together. Gaines measures their progress by the steps they have taken to reunite. The white son, on the other hand, initiates progress by separating himself from his father. With this severance, he rejects the stagnant racial codes of the past and forges a new tradition of racial cooperation and harmony. This white son can then become a new kind of father, and a separation between white father and son may no longer be necessary.

Although Gaines's fathers and sons have a long way to go, they have
begun to make substantial progress toward reconciliation. At the end of *In My Father's House*, Phillip Martin has an opportunity to reach out to his son, Patrick, but we do not know if Martin will take advantage of this second chance at fatherhood. In *A Gathering*, the black fathers act when given an opportunity, and in the case of Mathu and Charlie, a son and father come together. Though Mathu is not Charlie's biological father, he did raise Charlie, and their union, coupled with the old black men's new manhood, suggests that black fathers and sons are moving slowly toward reunification. The whites also are able to reunite in *A Gathering*. In the courtroom scene that concludes the novel, Gil sits with his family; Fix has accepted him back as his son again. Thus Gaines presents us with a resolution more optimistic than in previous novels. He even allows us to find hope in the outcome of the football game: “LSU beat Ole Miss, twenty-one to thirteen. Both Gil and Cal had over a hundred yards each” (212). For the sake of the future, Gil took Russell's advice and played in that game. His and Cal's success is one more omen of a brighter future for blacks and whites. The emergence of Gil and Cal as powerful role models represents Gaines's vision that blacks and whites can share respectability in the world, creating a society that draws together fathers and sons of both races.

**Notes**

1. Bryant deals extensively with this conflict in “From Death” and “Gaines.” Bryant sees the old aunts as being largely successful in preventing change, more successful than I believe the evidence indicates.

2. In interviews, Gaines frequently mentions his aunt's courage and its impact on his life. *Miss Jane Pittman* is, in part, dedicated to her: “To the memory of my beloved aunt, Miss Augusteen Jefferson, who did not walk a day in her life but who taught me the importance of standing.”

3. Erikson presents his ideas on development and the life cycle in two books: *Childhood and Society* outlines the stages in “Eight Ages of Man” (247–74); *Identity: Youth and Crisis* includes most of the same ideas in “The Life Cycle: Epigenesis of Identity” (91–141), generally with clearer explanations. The latter also includes “Race and the Wider Identity” (295–320), which deals with the problems of blacks in establishing “identity,” a predominant concern in Gaines's works.