Race and the Tragic Mode in Ernest J. Gaines’s
A Gathering of Old Men
by Raphaël Lambert

Ernest Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) takes place in the late 1970s on the land of the Marshall plantation, a remote, unreconstructed spot in rural Louisiana. The novel tells the story of a group of humble African American elders who, for the first time in their lives, have resolved to stand up to their white oppressors. What makes *Gathering* vivid and compelling is Gaines’s use of a variety of theatrical conventions to dramatize a simple story of revenge against a backdrop of enduring racial oppression. The first part of this essay shows that *Gathering*, while organized according to standard dramatic conventions, is also a celebration of African American vernacular and rhetoric as tools for subverting authority. This emphasis on verbal performance, the systematic questioning of everyday reality, as well as the choric outlook of the group of old men, narrows the focus of this essay from theatricality to tragedy. As Gaines once acknowledged, “the sense of Greek tragedy... keeps coming back in my writing” (qtd in Lowe 30), and the second part of this essay further explores the influence of Greek tragedy on Gaines’s work. While this section brings into light the elements of Greek tragedy that characterize the novel, it also argues that the ethics of Greek tragedy are better suited than modern literary conventions and contemporary moral values to convey the idiosyncrasies of the black experience in the deep
South. Ultimately, *Gathering* is anything but what a slapdash review once called “a Louisiana pageant of calamity” and a “morality play” (Price 15). The novel highlights the complexity of the social and racial equation in 1970s Louisiana, provides a more acute understanding of past and present realities, and challenges the widespread and complacent notion that change is impossible.

**Theatrical Characteristics in Gathering**

Tragedy is a crisis . . . in the wake of which no one among the heroes is the same as before.

—Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Le miroir Brisé*

The opening scene of *Gathering* is deceptively simple: Beau Boutan, a Cajun farmer, has been shot dead in front of the cabin of Mathu, a solitary, charismatic African American elder. The back story to this simple murder, however, is really what *Gathering* is all about: the murder of a white man by a black man immediately exacerbates the racial tensions that saturate the fragile social mosaic of this isolated southern locality that has remained unchanged by the reforms of the civil rights movement. Choosing not to “crawl under the bed like [they] used to” (28), the old men have gathered in Mathu’s yard where they brace themselves for the showdown with Fix Boutan, the father of the victim. There is no doubt in the minds of the hoary old lot that Fix, notorious for his bigotry and cruelty against black people, will show up to avenge the murder of his son. Everything designates Mathu as the culprit, but each old man has come to Mathu’s with a gun loaded with one empty number-five shell similar to the one that killed Beau. When Sheriff Mapes gets there to arrest Mathu, each and every man stands before Mapes and claims, “I did it.”

The originality of *Gathering* derives in part from its multiple-perspective narration, in which all kinds of individuals—white and black, male and female, old and young, and rich and poor—have something to say about the murder of Beau Boutan. Sometimes complementary, sometimes discordant, the voices in *Gathering* are often organized in dialogues that, along with other forms of communication (gazes, silences, and body language), contribute to make *Gathering* a theatrical novel. *Gathering* also resembles a play as it observes the three unities of time, place, and action. The story takes place in one day, from the killing of Beau Boutan to the final shootout. Almost everything happens in one place: Mathu’s
yard. Finally, the story follows the standard formula whereby theatrical action is organized according to (1) *exposition*—the murder of Beau; (2) *complication*—the armed old men hope for a deadly showdown with Fix and his clan; (3) *crisis*—Fix won’t show up; Big Charlie (the actual murderer) decides to surrender but xenophobic Luke Will shows up, and a shootout ensues; and (4) *resolution*—Luke Will and Big Charlie die. The old men feel they have achieved their goal; at the trial that takes place one week after the shootout (in the last chapter of the novel), the old men are acquitted.

In addition to this conventional structure, a visualization of Mathu’s yard comes to look like a well-organized set. In the background, one imagines sugarcane fields as far as the eye can see, while Mathu’s porch is filled with black people and a lot of shotguns in calloused hands. In between Mathu’s cabin and the road, one imagines a little bare, dusty yard, a shabby footbridge straddling over a dry, shallow ditch to reach a narrow, pebbly dirt road where reporter Lou Dimes, Sheriff Mapes, and other visitors park their cars. Right at the entrance of Mathu’s yard, the body of Beau Boutan lies. Beau has trespassed on a symbolic boundary between two antagonistic worlds and it is around and about this dead body, with all the historical, political and sociological weight it carries, that a heated debate starts taking place. Mathu’s yard has become an improvised stage, a sort of public space halfway between an arena and a forum where the old people tell of their grief, past and present, re-enact traumatizing memories, and decry white injustice from slavery to the present. Mathu’s yard has become the place where the dominant order and ideology are called into question, taking the reader far beyond a whodunit into the history of poor African American sharecroppers and the land they have tilled for generation.

Mathu’s yard is also the place where the old men achieve, at last, a sense of communal unity. At the beginning of the novel, a crucial scene in the old graveyard foreshadows the old men’s newfound sense of solidarity. The old men are not only in the graveyard to pay homage to their ancestors, but also to remember that these ancestors *came*, as it were, in the same boat, and that today, the old men themselves *are*, metaphorically speaking, in the same boat. Thus, the graveyard scene is more than a nostalgic event: the fraternity that is going to develop that day among all these men implies a willful blindness toward color antagonism. Hence their first act of mutual *entente* consists in transcending their differences in skin pigmentation—a legacy from antiquated racial values that are often at the source of their dissension. This display of tolerance triggers
the old men’s unity and is the foundation of their resolve in their confrontation with sheriff Mapes. What the old people tell Mapes and one another in Mathu’s yard is nothing new, but it is liberating and empowering. The verbal sparring, the sermon-like speeches, and the dramatic soliloquies that follow one another are not intended to change the world or to alter the course of events. They simply work as a catalyst for action. The rebellious old men know their obstinacy will bring about mayhem, and the purpose of their discourses is to justify their endeavor.

A literal illustration of theatricality in action is the line Candy (the young heiress to the Marshall plantation) and the old men form in front of Mapes. In order to subvert the sheriff’s authority, Candy and the old men launch into a choreography of non-violence. Rather wryly, Rufe describes the scene:

[Mapes] had already used his only little knowledge he knowed how to deal with black folks—knocking them around. When that didn’t change a thing, when people started getting in line to be knocked around, he didn’t know what else to do. So now, he just stood there, a big fat red hulk, looking down at the ground. (93)

Although it is Candy who positions herself at the head of the line—reinforcing the idea that she is the protector of those she calls “her” people—this lining up marks the old men’s first deliberate act of civil disobedience. It is a first concrete step toward the old men’s self-liberation as a unified group. By performing this act, they manage to make Mapes more malleable. The line they form in front of Mapes has a dehumanizing effect: it turns Mapes into a mere mechanical slapping device. Mapes realizes that his way of asserting his authority is being legitimately questioned. Silent protest becomes denunciation of police brutality. Gable pushes the manipulation even further by triggering Mapes’s predisposition to guilt. As Mapes deals two blows in Gable’s face, Gable faces him again and defies him: “Not the other cheek? . . . Both times you hit the same one—not the other one?” (69). Gable, by parodying the familiar Christian parable, forces Mapes to serious self-examination. As a white Christian male who grew up in the Bible Belt, Mapes cannot escape his religious background, which condemns violence. Mapes, the virtuous dispenser of justice, is recast as a sinner.

This scene, somewhere between slapstick comedy and social drama, prefigures the complex tone of the novel, as serious or volatile situations are often diffused with scenes of comic relief. This scene is also very important as it redresses the balance of power between the old men and
the sheriff. Emboldened by their first act of courage, the old men are ready to engage Mapes in a verbal confrontation in which power and authority are not given but must be gained. The oratorical contest between Mapes and the black folks quickly turns to the advantage of the latter and reaches its pinnacle when Johnny Paul addresses the sheriff. The verbal sparring between the men is crucial. Mapes, at the beginning of his strong-arm questioning, controls the situation, and even throws in a pinch of humor. To Candy who wants to protect “her” people by accusing herself of the murder, Mapes answers: “Sure. . . . And my name is Santa Claus” (70). He is unable, however, to discriminate between Candy’s ill-founded claim and the profound motivations that animate the black people and give them the tremendous strength and courage necessary to stand up to the law. Mapes’s lack of appreciation has significant consequences. Unlike Candy, the old men all have good reasons to shoot Beau Boutan. Their alibi, just like Candy’s, may not be very strong, but they all have a good story to tell; and their stories form history, the history of the plantation quarters, still haunted by ghosts of Jim Crow laws and slavery. Keith Clark, exploring the correlation between communality and black masculinity in Gathering, observes that “storytelling” and “storylistening” operate as processes of subject formation (196). Mapes completely overlooks the importance of this cultural phenomenon. He chooses to look down on the old men, and in consequence, he is going to be trapped.

Mapes, to whom Clatoo, Dirty Red, Johnny Paul and Jacob hurl their claims of guilt, expresses his annoyance by an iterative “I see,” thus betraying the little importance he gives these claims. Mapes’s impertinence is going to spur Johnny Paul’s boldness: “No, you don’t see.” The old man jumps at the opportunity and begins a connotative discourse reminiscent of Henry Louis Gates’s reflection on the “Signifyin(g) Monkey.” This monkey is both a character from African mythology and a rhetorical figure defined as a “technique of indirect argument or persuasion” (239). The fable, as Gates and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan have observed, illustrates the situation well: “The Monkey and the lion do not speak the same language; the lion is not able to interpret the Monkey’s use of language. The Monkey speaks figuratively, in a symbolic code. The lion interprets or reads literally and suffers the consequences of folly, which is the reversal of his status as king of the jungle” (Gates 241). After his cutting retort to the sheriff, Johnny Paul takes the rest of the crowd to task and asks them to look and to tell him if they see anything. Mapes sees only foolishness in such words, and finds it necessary to reassure the old man: “I see nothing but weeds, Johnny Paul. . . . If that’s what you’re
trying to say” (88). The supposedly senile man knows too well what he is trying to say and answers Mapes: “Yes sir. . . . Yes sir, I figured that’s all you would see. But what do the rest don’t see? What y’all don’t see, Rufe? . . . What y’all don’t see, Clatoo? . . . What y’all don’t see, all the rest of y’all?” (88). Mapes, impaired by historical myopia, still does not take Johnny Paul seriously, and an absurd dialogue ensues:

“I don’t have time for people telling me what they can’t or don’t see, Johnny Paul” . . .
“You ain’t got nothing but time, sheriff.”
“What?” Mapes said.
“I did it,” Johnny Paul said.
“I see,” Mapes said. “Either I stand here and let you talk about things you don’t see, and the things the others don’t see, or I take you in? I see.”
“Yes, sir,” Johnny Paul said. “But you still don’t see. Yes, sir, what you see is the weeds, but you don’t see what we don’t see.”
“Do you see it, Johnny Paul?” Mapes asked him.
“No, I don’t see it,” Johnny Paul said. “That’s why I kilt him.”
“I see,” Mapes said.
“No, you don’t,” Johnny Paul said. “No, you don’t. You had to be here to don’t see it now. You just can’t come down here every now and then. You had to live here seventy-seven years to don’t see it now. No, sheriff, you don’t see. You don’t even know what I don’t see.” (88 – 89)

Johnny Paul draws a clear line between Mapes, the enforcer of white authority, and the dwellers in the plantation quarters. It is a distinction between victims and persecutor. Mapes, however, is still in a daze:

“Do you know what you don’t see?” Mapes asked him.

The “no more” at the end of this sentence reveals that Johnny Paul is referring to the past. Johnny Paul’s discourse is a historical judgment. Mapes finally understands that the old men need to talk, and he says, rather condescendingly, “All right . . . tell me. But make it quick” (89). When Johnny Paul makes a very explicit reference to past things that are not here anymore (“Do you hear the church bell ringing?”), Mapes, who remains doubtful about Johnny Paul’s sanity, wonders: “Are you all
right?” (90). Mapes is confused, and like the lion in the African myth, he loses his power. Such a loss is marked by the fact that Mapes surrenders to the demand of the old men to be listened to. From this passage on, Mapes shows respect for the old men. Although he does not want to appear affected by any of the old men’s testimonies to the horrors they endured in the past, he finds no alternative but to observe a fitting silence after some of the speeches, thus participating in the respect shared by the impromptu assembly. The novel, by insisting on Mapes’s compunction and the awe that radiates from all the listeners after some of the old men’s words, emphasizes what is really at stake in these scenes: the negation of the black folk’s past, the eradication of their folklore and culture, the dispossession of their land to the Cajun farmers (with the complicity of the planters), their subsequent rural exodus, and the resulting decrepitude of the quarters.

Johnny Paul’s discursive game is only the first of a series of skillfully articulated discourses in the novel. With the exception of Beulah, whose dialectical showdown with Mapes borders on a physical confrontation, most speeches are meant to be declaimed, preferably in front of a static, attentive audience, as old Tucker’s poignant, preacher-like speech exemplifies: “I’m stating facts . . . Facts. ’Cause this is the day of reckoning, and I will speak the truth” (94). Describing neoclassical drama, Jean Mitry argues that it “can be acted in front of a simple curtain” (335). Taking Jean Racine’s Phèdre as an example, Mitry explains that the way Créon dresses does not matter at all “because the words that he speaks attest to his thought and acts” (335–336). In Gathering, words are also preeminent. Each of the old men’s speech eclipses everything around, to wit the commentary following Tucker’s speech: “We stayed quiet. Mapes was quiet. His little deputy was quiet. No air was stirring, so the trees, the bushes, everything was quiet” (98). The same phenomenon occurs after Gable’s speech: “Even the children on the steps didn’t move. You couldn’t hear a bird, any kind of sound on the whole place. Mapes even kept the candy in his mouth still” (102). According to Mitry, the words such orators speak define them: “the theatrical ‘presence’ is the formal unity of the actor and the word: it is the word incarnate. The actor, in the theater, does not play a role: he assumes a manner of speaking, a character defined entirely by the text” (337).

It is such a theatrical presence the old men assume, but what makes their performances relevant, beyond their improvisational and artistic qualities, is their subversive power. The dialogue Johnny Paul ini-
tiates with Sheriff Mapes is not meant to be a real dialogue where two interlocutors debate, on an equal footing, issues on which they disagree. It is rather an excuse for Johnny Paul to create an imaginary world to which his audience—his folk gathered in Mathu’s yard—can relate. It is this confusion between the real and the unreal on which Johnny Paul plays. The imaginary world Johnny Paul has created becomes the world of authenticity for those who can see it—that is, those Johnny Paul has convened. Mapes, Johnny Paul makes clear, is not welcome and he is turned, together with the white world he represents, into something unreal. The Marshall plantation—as a synecdoche of the tyrannical white world—becomes an absurd nightmare, a dystopia characterized by weeds, desolation, and lifelessness. The plantation contrasts with the world that springs from Johnny Paul’s mind. For those who are admitted into Johnny Paul’s virtual world, the world of Mapes is the more abnormal of the two. It is a world that looks real but is artificial, unnatural, and fabricated: it is the world of segregation.

Johnny Paul’s transposition of his audience into his imaginary world is intended to bring forth latent memories of suffering and humiliation, but it is also a way of stimulating discussions and debates about the real world. This questioning of everyday reality, according to Jean-Pierre Vernant, finds its roots in Greek tragedy. Tragedy, Vernant argues, “is the city that turns itself into a theater, staging itself in front of the citizens” (Mythe 22). Vernant links the advent of the tragedy to the evolution of legal thought in Athens, and although the situation is very different in Gathering, the series of speeches in Mathu’s yard aims at exposing and confronting customs and values inherited of a legal system officially abolished but actually enduring in this secluded corner of the Deep South.

Gathering is also reminiscent of Greek tragedy in its structure: “[the] old men’s recollection[s] are a choral litany for the quarters,” Charles H. Rowell writes. “And their voices,” Rowell adds, “merge as a kind of contemporary chorus recounting physical and psychological violence done them and their immediate families, as the list of wrongs they cite reverberates down the centuries” (747). The choric personality of the group of old men is all the more potent that the old men stand physically close together and unified in thought. Traditionally, the chorus constitutes a collective and anonymous character that usually represents public opinion or popular wisdom (Coulet 34), reacting to the play as the general populace would. It is also understood as a supplier of information meant to advance the plot, comment on main themes, and tell the audience about
personal feelings and emotions actors could not or would not otherwise impart. It is rather static and intervenes in the play verbally only. Helene Foley debunks these pre-conceived ideas about what she calls the “risk-free passivity” (15) of the chorus and redefines choral identity in terms that reflect the old men’s role and overall influence on the plot of Gathering much more accurately. Foley gives as an example “the fate of Aeschylus’ choruses [which] is deeply involved with that of his protagonists” (15); she adds that Aeschylus’ choruses’ “dialogue with actors is more involved” (15), and later points out that the twelve old men of the chorus in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon “breaks down into a group of individualized voices” (20)—a description that fits the old men in Gathering as well.

The group of old men in Gathering differs from a traditional chorus in at least two instances. First, each and every old man is altogether actor, member of the chorus, and spectator. Second, this group of old men, especially in the absence of the hero for a good two-thirds of the novel, assumes the role of a central character since it is at the core of a conflict whose outcome is entirely contingent on the old men since they have taken their fate into their hands. Finally, while all choruses, as Foley argues, “gravitate to traditional wisdom, even when such wisdom is misapplied or only crudely fits the situation at hand” (20–21), the voice of the old men is a dissenting voice. The purpose of the old men is not to endorse the accommodationist, even subservient, attitude that prevails in their society but, on the contrary, to challenge the established order, to go against what would be considered popular wisdom in order to provoke a change, or at least question a way of life that has become unacceptable.

Beyond these basic questions of form and content, Gaines’s fiction seems to point toward Arthur Miller’s 1949 demythologization of Greek tragedy in “Tragedy and the Common Man”: “I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were” (3). Miller deems tragedy an art form of and for the masses, for “if the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it” (3). Tragedy, Miller implies, has a universal dimension that transcends class and other like-hierarchies among human beings. According to Miller, tragedy occurs when an individual, seeing that his/her self-esteem is threatened, decides to do something about it: “I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity” (3). This battle to assert one’s worth is at the heart of Gathering: Big Charlie
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killed Boutan because, deprived of his basic human rights as a black man, and repeatedly bullied and humiliated, he has decided that he had been “bused enough” (189). Miller places the loss of dignity and the recovery thereof at the source of tragedy, which he defines as “the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly” (4), that is, to right a social wrong, to reassess or re-assert one’s lawful and legitimate position in society, be it at the price of life. *Gathering* is a tragedy not only because it fits so well Miller’s definition of it, but also because in tragedy, Gaines has found structures and values best suited to give a voice to his people—the people among whom he grew up in the old slave quarters of rural Louisiana.

**Gathering and Greek Tragedy**

In tragedy, we are reminded that we live in a world that is not of our own making or control and yet a world to which we are answerable.  
—Dennis Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life*

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that the mimetic power of tragedy is precisely its virtue because it is conducive to identification with the hero and makes catharsis (the purification of our emotions) possible. In *Gathering*, however, the notion of catharsis must be qualified for while catharsis is traditionally understood through the relation between the audience (the readership) and the simulated representation of life (the novel), it is here displaced onto the very action itself. In other words, catharsis is not to be found in the audience but in the plot—which is reminiscent of a point Gerald F. Else made more than sixty years ago. For Else, catharsis is not “an emotional end-effect with which we leave the theater” (229). Instead, Else argues, “the purification . . . is carried forward by the plot, the ‘structure of events’ which is the poet’s own indispensable contribution to the play” (230). But *Gathering* revisits further the notion of catharsis; for catharsis, in *Gathering*, is consciously sought after by the old men, and it is even self-inoculated as the old men prepare the ground for it. In *Gathering*, the so-called purgation of fear and (self-) pity does not occur *a posteriori* but is orchestrated *a priori* as an apodictic measure toward action and the final crisis—that is, the expected face-off with Fix Boutan, which is supposed to restore the old men’s long-lost dignity. Oscar Mandel argues that, “the essential function of tragedy
would appear to be the complicating and strengthening of the psyche
by means of shocks from the outside: not, of course, violent and disor-
ganizing shocks, but mild, preventive, reorganizing ones” (64–65). This
approach is consistent with the old men’s speeches in *Gathering*. Through
their speeches, the old men do not seek a definite effect—a shock treat-
ment as it were—but a way to release repressed emotions as a step toward
catharsis.

When each old man steps out of the group and starts talking, the oth-
ers become his audience—an audience that uses the testimonies of the
tragic past as both an outlet and a motivational speech. While nothing
can prevent the reader of *Gathering* from empathizing and identifying
with the old men gathered in Mathu’s yard, the *esprit de corps* that has
formed among the men urges the reader to a fitting emotional distance
from their group, as if to preserve the intimacy that holds the old men
together, while also avoiding meddling in their enterprise. The jubila-
tion the reader experiences at the end of *Gathering*, of course, is not to
be repressed. It is simply of a different order from that experienced by
the old men.

Tragedy, Northrop Frye argues, “seems to elude the antithesis of moral
responsibility and arbitrary fate, just as it eludes the antithesis of good
and evil” (211). Frye’s definition is particularly relevant to understanding
the action and psychology of Big Charlie, killer of Beau and tragic hero of
*Gathering*. Aristotle concedes that the tragic hero is imperfect and makes
mistakes, but he also stresses that the hero’s misfortune “is brought about
not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty” (Part XIII). This
tragic flaw, or *hamartia*, Frye explains, “is not necessarily wrongdoing,
much less weakness: it may be simply a matter of being a strong charac-
ter in an exposed position, like Cordelia” (38). Hence to wonder whether
Big Charlie is guilty or innocent is to ask the wrong question. Men are
fallible and must face the consequences of their acts, but tragedy invites
us to ponder not so much the moral significance of the hero’s acts as the
causes of such acts. Discussing Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*, Jan Kott argues
that what is tragic is neither Oedipus’s parricide nor incest, but the world
in which Gods impose such a fate. The tragic hero, Kott concludes, “is a
scapegoat” (15); and so is Big Charlie in *Gathering*. What is tragic in *Gath-
ering* is not that Big Charlie murdered Beau Boutan, but that *de facto* and
*de jure* racism pushed him to commit an irreparable crime. As Michel
Fabre pointed out long before *Gathering* had been written, Gaines’s fic-
tional universe “demonstrates that even in the South heroic transgressors
stood up against rules erected as fate by generations there” (122).
Analyzing Aeschylus’s theater, Corinne Coulet argues that ultimately human actions are regulated by the gods (41). According to Coulet, this divine justice, in its most archaic form, not only applied to whoever committed a crime but also to their family and descendants. The ancients called this relation between the hero’s acts and his community genos, and this notion of genos is particularly useful to understand what is at stake in *Gathering*. Big Charlie’s murder of Beau Boutan not only engages his moral, political and civic responsibilities, but also affects his family line and community. In other words, what would normally be considered the deed of one individual becomes the deed of one community. The amalgamation of family (blood ties) and community (cultural and racial kinship) in regards to the African American genos is a reminder that in the race-based society of the South, the diversity and complexity of the individual black identity has been stamped out and replaced by a monolithic and dehumanizing view of the African American community. And while making easier the dissolution of the individual into the group, this totalizing gaze can also hold the whole group accountable for the deeds of one of its members. In the end, the purpose is always the same: control and oppression, and when these two fundamentals are being challenged, violence is the response. This attitude is characteristic of Fix Boutan, the father of the victim: “Because the accused killer is a black man,” Valerie Melissa Babb explains, “he [Fix] feels justified in taking the law into his own hands and killing any black man for retribution, for all black men are guilty of Beau’s murder, by virtue of their color” (127). Hence when Big Charlie kills Beau Boutan, he commits more than a homicide: he violates—in his name and in the name of his people—a founding principle of southern society: that black people must be kept subordinate to the “superior” white race. The Cajun farmers—themselves considered a by-product of whiteness and trapped in the same logic of racial discrimination—want to avenge Beau out of honor and group loyalty, but they also want to punish the black community because one of them, Big Charlie, has upset the balance of racial power that has secured the Cajuns a social, political, and economical edge over their black counterparts ever since Reconstruction. This is why Big Charlie’s murder becomes a race-to-race rather than a man-to-man issue.

Countering Christian notions of guilt, the novel makes clear that Big Charlie, as well as the old men, is more sinned against than sinning. Their testimonies of past humiliations and brutalities attest to this fact, and retributive justice, like in ancient tragedy, does not appear as a human weakness any more. The unanimous rejection of Reverend Jameson, who
tries to convince his old parishioners to be compliant and surrender to the police, also illustrates the black folks’ rejection of the soothing Christian voice of reason. As if struck by a mysterious force, these members of the community suddenly look at Jameson, their spiritual leader, as the champion of a doctrine that is not really theirs and that has been used to tame and control them for centuries. It is also in this respect that Big Charlie’s act is heroic: by killing Beau Boutan, Big Charlie has opposed his “undefeated individual will” to an “arbitrary law of fate” (Mandel 4). Big Charlie found in himself the strength to stand up to the undisputed, albeit wrongful, authority of his white boss. Courage and its opposite, cowardice, are important elements both of tragedy and Gathering. Mandel refers to Aeschylus’s Choephares as a play in which “Orestes himself describes in vivid terms what happens to the man who would free himself from the demand of the vendetta: fangs, ulcers, pus and the like will plague him” (123). In Gathering, Old Tucker tells the story of his brother Silas, murdered for racing a tractor with a mule and winning, thus disrupting the balance of power between whites and blacks. Not only had Tucker been a powerless witness to the killing of his brother by Cajun farmers, but his fear had also led him to participate in the beating: “Been in here all these years, boiling in me . . . Done spoiled my intrance” (96). The one who shirks the demands of the vendetta, Tucker seems to imply, undergoes a sort of curse. Hence Big Charlie’s slaying of his abusive boss is a wake-up call, the catalyst for the revival of a long-forsaken solidarity and the signal for the old men that the time has come to break this curse and recover their dignity through an act of courage.

The Greek notion of “pollution” best defines Big Charlie’s situation. Pollution, Mandel writes, “can be defined in modern terms as the state of guilt without the condition of sin. Its characteristic emotion is horror rather than remorse” (126). Indeed, Big Charlie’s initial flight is the reaction of a man horrified by the implications of his crime: he slew another man, and that man embodies white authority. Big Charlie’s late surrender to sheriff Mapes expresses the attitude of a righteous man. Whether Big Charlie surrenders to Mapes because he is a law-abiding citizen or because he fears that hiding will be detrimental to his folk remains debatable. What is certain, however, is that Big Charlie feels no remorse. Rather, Big Charlie’s serenity after his confession conveys the feelings of a man who has accomplished a mission, and to whom the laws of Louisiana matter little in comparison to his own justice. Big Charlie asks Mapes to call him Mr. Biggs instead of Big Charlie because he knows—as does Mapes—that his behavior commands respect. In trag-
edy, Maurice Véricel argues, the hero is “quartered between freedom and fatality” (90). In *Gathering*, Big Charlie is equally torn asunder between these two poles: freedom can only be achieved at the price of personal sacrifice and fatal repercussions on the rest of the community. Ajax, the protagonist of Sophocles’s eponymous play, judges his own position in terms that suit Big Charlie’s: “Honour in life, or honour in death; there is no other thing a noble man can ask for. That is all” (34).

With the exception of the final shootout, there is no action in *Gathering*. The dynamics of the novel reside in Gaines’s carefully structured narrative interplay, which is also a defining characteristic of Greek tragedy. Greek tragedy obeys strict narrative rules, the narration varying according to the type of speaker and the type of situation. In tragedy, the prologue and the *parodos* (lyrical chant introducing the chorus) are followed by a sequence of alternating episodes and *stasima* (the parts chanted by the chorus). As a rule, episodes were written in iambic trimeters because it is the verse that most resembles simple conversation. These spoken parts (narration, discourses, and dialogues) intended, in the limits of versification, to be as spontaneous and down to earth as possible. Gaines excels at such spontaneity and homeliness in *Gathering*, and each old man could be compared to a typical tragic actor expressing painful and passionate emotions. As a chorus, the old men’s speeches also form a communal outcry.

This correlation between the individual and the collective is central both to *Gathering* and tragedy, and can be found in the *commos*, a system of call and response between an individual (the actor) and a group (the chorus) that echoes African Americans’ religious and musical traditions. The *commos* was a sort of lyrical dialogue in the form of a complaint in which the victims of destiny would express their emotions in a rather violent way. In *Gathering*, Reporter Lou Dimes’s meticulous description of Big Charlie’s sermon-like confession corresponds to such a structure:

He was black as tar, his round head and face sweating. I saw his round black sweaty face twitching, then trembling, and he stopped pacing the floor and raised those two big tree limbs up over his head, and like some overcome preacher behind the pulpit, he cried out: “But they comes a day! They comes a day when a man must be a man. They comes a day!” The two big tree limbs with the big fists like cannonballs shook toward the ceiling, and we watched in awe, in fear, in case he decided to whirl around, or fall. . . . “They comes a day.” (187–190)
Lou Dimes conveys with humor the awe Big Charlie inspires in his listeners, but the trance in which Big Charlie seems to be plunged strikingly echoes Frye’s description of tragic heroes who are “wrapped in the mystery of their communion with that something beyond which we can see only through them, and which is the source of their strength and their fate alike” (208). In this powerful exchange, Big Charlie’s words are answered not with words from the listeners but by the collective, respectful silence already observed after other speeches. There is, however, a dialogue between Big Charlie and the other speakers, but this dialogue, rather than verbal, is thematic and contextual. The theme is the same (race discrimination) but the context has shifted from events of the past to events in the present time. Big Charlie’s and earlier speeches create a continuum that emphasizes the historical standstill characteristic of the place: there has been no political and social evolution in the Marshall plantation and its surroundings.

The old men’s confidence that Fix is on his way to avenge the death of his son is shaken when Mapes announces that Fix, against all expectations, won’t show up. It is Mapes’s turn to address the old men, and Mapes chooses the local Salt-and-Pepper metaphor to get his point across. Salt, it turns out, is the popular LSU quarterback Gil Boutan, Fix’s son; and Pepper is his black running back and best friend, Cal Harrison. The moralizing tone Mapes uses echoes the traditional conclusion of the coryphaeus (the leader of the chorus) who would follow the exodus (chorus exit) in Greek theater:

Thirty years ago Fix woulda been here, woulda hanged Mathu on the nearest tree, and all the rest of you brave people woulda been still hiding under the bed. But something happened the last ten, fifteen years. Salt and Pepper got together. Now it’s nobody’s fault but yours. . . . Y’all did it. Y’all wasn’t satisfied Salt played at LSU on one side of the town, and Pepper played for Southern on the other side of the town—no y’all wanted them to play together. . . . Well, they did—and that’s what happened. Salt went back and talked to his daddy. Gil . . . told his daddy he needed Pepper and Pepper needed him. Told his daddy he wouldn’t go along with his daddy to lynch Mathu. Told his daddy, even, if the name Boutan got in the papers, he would never be All-American. But Y’all the ones did it . . . you cut your own throats. You told God you wanted Salt and Pepper to get together, and God did it for you. At the same time you wanted God
Mapes’s triumphant conclusion is short-lived, however, because the social changes to which Mapes refer have not yet had any definite impact on the little world of the Marshall plantation. As Coot puts it: “But Luke Will had to show up” (194). For Mapes, the arrival of the rabid racist Luke Will is a nightmare, but for the old men—as the rhetorical use of the modal auxiliary “had to” by Coot shows—it participates in an immutable logic. From the old men’s standpoint, Luke Will’s coming can be compared to a *Deus ex machina* as it is an undreamed-of occurrence that is going to solve the quandary in which they find themselves. In this perspective, the return of Big Charlie just before Luke Will’s appearance does not seem fortuitous any longer. The showdown between Big Charlie and Luke Will, and by extension between the black and the white communities, belongs to a logic that exists independently of the control of simple mortals.

### The Trial

You emerge from tragedy equipped against lies.

—Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theater*

According to S. H. Butcher, “tragedy, in its pure idea, shows us a mortal will engaged in an unequal struggle with destiny, whether that destiny be represented by the forces within or without the mind. The conflict reaches its tragic issue when the individual perishes, but through his ruin the disturbed order of the world is restored and the moral forces reassert their sway” (qtd in Mandel 21–22). *Gathering* follows such a pattern as it suggests that Big Charlie’s sacrifice was not made in vain. The murder of one Cajun farmer by one black sharecropper is not going to upset the racial status quo, but the trial that follows the shootout in which Big Charlie and Luke Will killed each other questions the old racial equation and suggests that there is hope for a change in the South. Although the mistreatment Big Charlie underwent at the hands of Beau indicates that life on the Marshall plantation has remained impervious to Civil Rights improvements, and although the presence of the Nazi party, the Klan, and the NAACP at the trial is a reminder that racial tensions are still very much alive, the verdict is fair. Judge Reynolds argues
that, “since the two who [have] killed [are] both dead, being the same two who [have] killed Beau and shot Mapes,” he cannot “pass judgment over them” (213). As for all defendants, Judge Reynolds puts “all of them on probation for the next five years, or until their deaths—whichever comes first” (213).

Courtroom scenes do not seem to be the stuff of Greek tragedy. Yet, Jacqueline de Romilly reconciles the law and tragedy, pointing out that indulgence and forgiveness started to appear in Greek courts toward the beginning of the fourth century and were naturally incorporated in the works of the tragedians (61). The plays of Sophocles and Euripide, Romilly argues, bear witness to an evolution toward a more “enlightened justice” that takes into account “extenuating circumstances” such as ignorance or duress (63). These ideas, no doubt, are in the mind of Judge Reynolds whose verdict reflects Gil Boutan’s position on racial harmony. When Gil is at his father’s home, he insists that Luke Will and his gang “are a dying breed,” and that “[t]hey need a cause like this [the murder of Beau] to pump blood back into their dying bodies” (143). Gil, the educated one in the Boutan family, embodies tolerance, change, and confidence in the law of his country. Trust in legal procedures, despite their historical failures, is a first decisive step toward the end of vigilante justice.

Just like a post-tragic episode in a traditional tragedy, the trial offers the author’s commentary on his work. Comparing the Bayonne of Gaines to the Yoknapatawpha of Faulkner, Michel Fabre argues that “just as Faulkner’s whites could not exist in a world without blacks, Gaines’s blacks are intimately tied to the planters and Cajuns by blood and by suffering” (111). Gaines would certainly concur with Fabre’s reading of his early fiction as depicting a world of difficult but inevitable race cohabitation. But through Gathering, Gaines also reminds us that enmity between blacks and whites has become so paradigmatic that it is difficult to imagine that it could be otherwise. Gaines deconstructs clichés about race relations and forces us to re-examine preconceived ideas. For instance, we expect Mapes to be the archetypal racist sheriff of the rural South, but Mapes, we learn, holds Mathu in great esteem and unlike his young Deputy Griffin, Mapes is more concerned with the strict application of the law than teaching black criminals a lesson. As for Fix Boutan, his proverbial hostility toward black people has given way to carefully calculated resignation.

The happy ending atmosphere of the courtroom scene may seem bathetic, but the scene is not meant to comfort us with the idea that rac-
ism may be waning. On the contrary, Judge Reynolds’s cautious disguise of his clemency as serendipity (the culprits are already punished since they killed each other) indicates that the old judge is very much aware that delivering his verdict too bluntly may actually backfire and stir up rather than appease racial antagonism. Judge Reynolds’s verdict is much more than a convenient _modus vivendi_ that satisfies both the defense and the plaintiff. It mirrors the Salt-and-Pepper metaphor, i.e., the friendship between Cajun football player Gilbert “Salt” Boutan and his African American running mate on the LSU team, Calvin “Pepper” Harrison. Both Gil and Cal are already nominated as All-Americans, and this is what Gaines hopes the South can achieve: to become All-American, as opposed to All-Racially-Divided-American. As Fabre concluded in his analysis of Gaines’s early fiction: “The South must either change or be destroyed” (121).

NOTES

1. This and subsequent translations from the French are mine.
2. The three unities of action, place, and time are a set of rules for drama conceived during the neoclassical movement and based on a misreading of Aristotle’s _Poetics_. While Aristotle defines a unity of action whereby a play should focus on one main action (lest a proliferation of subplots affects the overall clarity of the story), he suggests, much less establishes, no rule concerning the unities of place and time. Hence the classical unities, although largely disseminated among the greater public, are not necessarily adopted by professionals. Finally, these unities weren’t typical of Greek tragedy and Gaines’s use of them is simply a way of anchoring his story into easily identifiable theatrical referents. As this essay later demonstrates, what Gaines calls “a sense of Greek tragedy” forcefully manifests itself in other aspects of the novel.
3. Considering the argument developed in the essay, the term “stage” is also meant to evoke the theatrical term “open” or “thrust stage,” which is defined as “a stage that extends into the auditorium so that the audience is seated around three sides” (_Oxford English Dictionary_). It is opposed to the more classical proscenium, which forms a window around the scenery and actors, and faces the audience rather than being surrounded by it on three sides.
4. Aside from the old men’s colorful language and humor pervading the novel, and in addition to this scene in which both Candy’s antiquated paternalistic values and Mapes’s brutality are mocked, Gaines reduces extreme tensions on two occasions: first, the lunch break organized by Miss Merle, during which the necessary sharing of food works as a pacifier and erases social differences; second, the trial at the end of the novel in which Judge Reynolds’ verdict, while reflecting the xenophobia plaguing the community, also underlines the absurdity of the whole case.
5. French neoclassical theater greatly differed from Greek tragedy even though the Greek repertoire exercised a great influence on the works of playwrights such as Jean Rotrou, Pierre Corneille, and Jean Racine whose *Phèdre* (1677) had already inspired the Athenian Euripides and later the Roman Seneca. Mitry’s point may not apply as much to Greek tragedy as it does to neoclassicism. However, we may venture that, in a form of theater where each actor wore a mask and played several roles, great attention was given to words, both in terms of content and performance.

6. While this essay briefly discusses the notion of catharsis in relation to tragedy, it does not intend to enter the ongoing scholarly debate surrounding Aristotle’s ambiguous definition of catharsis in relation to pity and fear in the sixth chapter of *Poetics*. It only refers to significant works when necessary and the phrases “purification of fear” and “purification of fear” will be used indiscriminately.

7. In *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the *commos* as “a joint lamentation of chorus and actors” (Part XII). Margaret Alexiou points out that the *commos*, “sung antiphonally by one or more actors and chorus,” is a type of call and response (132).

WORKS CITED


