"You Think a Man Can't Kneel and Stand?": Ernest J. Gaines's Reassessment of Religion as Positive Communal Influence in "A Lesson before Dying"

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“YOU THINK A MAN CAN’T KNEEL AND STAND?”
Ernest J. Gaines’s Reassessment of Religion as Positive Communal Influence In A Lesson Before Dying

by William R. Nash

In the bayou country of Ernest J. Gaines’s fiction, everyone has an opinion about the church. Indeed, although professional religious figures rarely play prominent roles in Gaines’s stories, none of his works overlook the issue of religion and its impact on the African-American community. Through most of his corpus, that impact is primarily negative, largely because of the consistent weakness of the preachers who minister to the communities Gaines portrays. From Reverend Armstrong in Catherine Carmier (1964) to Reverend Jameson in A Gathering of Old Men (1983), Gaines’s ministers preach an adherence to Christ and a concomitant social passivity that ultimately proves unacceptable.

The sole exception to the rule of social passivity is Reverend Phillip Martin, the protagonist of In My Father’s House (1978). Unlike his fellow clergy, Martin is active in his community as a Civil Rights leader; his history prior to the beginning of the novel’s action includes numerous successful protests against white institutions and several arrests for his resistance to oppression. However, although Martin has been socially active in the past, the events in the novel force him into a passivity that undermines all of his previous efforts. Though he starts stronger than any of his peers, he also falls much farther, thereby reinforcing Gaines’s challenge to the efficacy of the minister as social figure in these early works.

With its portrayal of events from the Civil Rights Movement, In My Father’s House makes explicit a current in Gaines’s fiction that appears more subtly in his earlier work. In Catherine Carmier, “The Sky is Gray” and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines sets up conflict between ministers and young, educated, militant African Americans and consistently resolves it in favor of the younger generation. The tension between generations he describes resonates with historical tensions between the generation of ministers who formed the foundation of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the active, increasingly militant young people, such as Stokely Carmichael, who formed the nucleus of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). These early works, therefore, implicitly condemn the minister’s role as activist in the Civil Rights struggle and simultaneously celebrate an agenda of reform that is not strictly tied to the church.

That condemnation becomes overt in In My Father’s House, where Phillip Martin fails to save either his son or himself from the sins of his past and where he sacrifices his community in the course of his futile attempts. The minister’s weakness and his inability to connect with young, militant African Americans suggests both an irreconcilable generational rupture within the African-American community and the fundamental uselessness of the church as an agent for meaningful change. Advancing this position throughout his early work, Gaines consistently aligns himself with a political position that scholar Charles Hamilton identified in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

There is a widespread attitude among many young black people in their late teens through their twenties and mid-thirties that the church, generally, is not a very useful institution in the black community. Their criticisms are even more severe against ministers. . . . This criticism sees the church as playing the role of making people complacent with their lot on earth and offering them rewards in the hereafter. The ministers are seen as the major perpetrators of this belief, as well as the major beneficiaries. (208)

This cynicism and the related belief that religion is actually more harmful than beneficial to the African-American community informs the recurrent critique Gaines offers in his early fiction.

In *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), however, Gaines steps away from that pattern, affirming and empowering the minister and the church as agents for change within the community and suggesting the possibility of meaningful collaboration between groups he has traditionally portrayed as antagonistic. As Reverend Ambrose and Grant Wiggins work together to determine how best to help young Jefferson, who stands convicted of murder and sentenced to death, they forge a bond that demonstrates what each generation can learn from the other. This connection, which grows largely from the minister’s willingness to share power and to loosen his rigid sense of propriety in the service of a greater good, points to a possibility for community among African Americans which both marks a new direction for Gainer and casts new light on the historical record.

Significantly, Gaines sets this tale of community building in the late 1940s, several years prior to the beginning of the major Civil Rights push in the South. As Herman Beavers notes, "A Lesson Before Dying . . . moves backward in time, using allegory to make a commentary on the African American odyssey in the South" (173). The novel presents a new perspective on both the community’s past and future by moving to a time before the conflict between ministers and young militants erupted, a point when the African-American church was in a period of conservatism that countered its pre-Migration political stance (Lincoln 209). As the minister and the teacher work out their differences and find a way to collaborate, one sees a positive relationship existing between generations during even the bitterest conflict. Furthermore, the genuine and workable compromise the men achieve promises to last longer than any mere surface reconciliation might.

Taken together, these insights illustrate both what held the African-American community together during the Civil Rights struggle and how that bond serves as a foundation for meaningful future action both within the community and between races. This marks the great change for Gaines. Like the militant student in “The Sky is Gray,” for much of his early career his method has been to “question everything” (95) that the community has been told, particularly the lessons of a faith that he sees as having been used traditionally by whites to oppress blacks. However, though his impulse is to challenge, he does not surrender to the despair plaguing his characters. Gaines has repeatedly said that he does not believe in organized religion, but that he does have faith in or hope for a higher power in the universe. As Marcia Gaudet notes in her analysis of Gaines’s religion, however bleak the view of the church might be “ultimately there is the hope for a return to faith” (“The Failure” 87).

*A Lesson Before Dying* represents that return. The novel recounts the story of Jefferson, a young black man unjustly convicted of murdering a white storekeeper and sentenced to death by a jury of whites who see him as little better than a “hog” (4), and of Grant Wiggins’ attempts to reach him before he dies. The teacher at the plantation school, Wiggins must go to Jefferson and make him understand his own humanity so that Jefferson’s nannan, or godmother, Miss
Emma, can come to terms with his death. Embittered and disillusioned by his own experiences of racial injustice in the quarter and in Bayonne, the nearby town where Jefferson is jailed, Grant initially resists taking on the assignment. Ultimately, however, he cannot deny Miss Emma and his own Tante Lou, who demand his service as their due.

Much of the old women’s strength comes from their religion, a character trait that links them to other elderly people in Gaines’s corpus; similarly, as in the other works, their religion causes of conflict with the younger generation that sees their devotion as a sign of weakness and ignorance. Despite these resonances with Gaines’s other novels, however, in A Lesson we find that religious adherence does more good than harm. Even more interesting than the effect of religion on these women, though, is the new version of the minister that Gaines presents. Reverend Mose Ambrose, Tante Lou’s and Miss Emma’s pastor, struggles powerfully with Grant over the nature and content of the lesson Jefferson will learn before his execution, and he makes a significant and beneficial impact on both teacher and student. Able to recognize the value of what the teacher brings to the process and to affirm the importance of his faith, Ambrose bridges the generation and faith gaps that separate him from Grant and forges a bond that enables them to both help Jefferson and enact social change between the races. This result demonstrates the value of his approach over the SCLC-SNCC style insfighting that plagues the characters in “The Sky is Gray” and In My Father’s House.

In Reverend Ambrose, Gaines has remade his weak, self-indulgent preacher into a tenacious, devoted servant who can truly minister to the community’s needs. Unlike his predecessors, especially Phillip Martin and the nameless minister, Reverend Ambrose knows what he has to do and does it well, with a right purpose in mind as he accomplishes the tasks. Furthermore, his actions have value previously withheld from ministers in Gaines’s body of work. His service is crucial to the preservation of the entire community, not just the older generation who typically follow the church in all of Gaines’s fiction. As the scene depicting the children praying during Jefferson’s execution indicates, Ambrose’s religion is something that can sustain, not something that the members of the community “are attempting to overcome” (Papa 188).

In allowing the preacher significant power and showing him use it only for the good of his people, Gaines admits that the church can be useful to the community rather than just a conduit for white oppression. In fact, the reformed tool of oppression has been modified now into something that can help Reverend Ambrose ease his community’s pain, a function that Gaines typically assigns to non-religious, community-identified messianic figures such as Ned Douglass and Jimmy Aaron in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman or Charlie Biggs in A Gathering of Old Men. Gaines’s elevating religion and the religious figure to the height previously reserved for these messiahs who have consistently rejected and often subverted the church indicates his new understanding of the good that organized religion can do for the community.

As he celebrates the value of this institution, which his characters have repeatedly rejected as tainted by its association with white culture, he also recognizes the fruit of that community building in the resultant new possibilities in black-white relations that transcend the oppression and divisiveness typical of the racial interactions he portrays. In A Lesson, a black man and a white man become friends and treat each other with respect, something one never sees in any convincing sense elsewhere in Gaines’s fiction. His newly articulated appreciation for religion stands, therefore, as representation of a more moderate world view centering on human connection and harmony rather than racial separation. The final reconciliation comes about because Grant, unlike his predecessors, learns somehow to believe in the value of religion for the community and perhaps for himself. Though his experience with Jefferson has much to do with the change he undergoes, Grant also learns a powerful lesson from Reverend Ambrose, an indication of the connection between young and old, religious and educated, that Gaines forges here as a corrective against his earlier divisive portrayal.

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The preacher’s ability to teach effectively sets him apart from Gaines’s other ministers. This separation is so crucial to Gaines’s revision of his well-established views, that he emphasizes differences in the new clergyman from the very beginning, with his description of Ambrose’s appearance. A small, balding man with unusually large hands, Ambrose lacks the characteristic signs of power and wealth present in Gaines’s other ministers. The nameless preacher of “The Sky is Gray,” for example, is a big, powerful man with a massive body and expensive clothes. He complements his suit with a “gold chain” (94), a doubly significant symbol of his material success and his bondage to a set of ideas which prove inadequate in the face of the student’s challenge. The other elements of his appearance, his expensive attire and his bulk, evoke the somewhat stereotypical negative image of the preacher as self-serving materialist present elsewhere in Gaines’s corpus. Reverend Phillip Martin, for instance, is big, strong, very well dressed, and prepared to betray his people to meet his own needs.

By contrast, Reverend Ambrose’s worn clothes and small frame integrate him into his community rather than setting him apart from it. He does not tower over Tante Lou and Miss Emma; instead, he stands beside them, much more nearly their equals than any of his fellow clergy in Gaines’s works. His simplicity of attire also indicates his simplicity of heart. Committed to his congregation, he does the work he is called to do, even when it is hard; unlike Phillip Martin, he has no interest in fine clothes or big cars. He only wants to serve his community. Gaines represents this desire and ability for service in Ambrose’s hands, which are both large and strong. Though they might appear a bit out of place on his small frame, his hands symbolize his connection to the working people in his congregation and his applied understanding of the value of labor.

The preacher’s name, Mose Ambrose, also has important religious significance. The connotations of Moses, as one who will lead his people out of the wilderness, are obvious; in this context they are striking primarily because typically Gaines’s ministers are the lost ones, not the real leaders. The preacher’s surname evokes St. Ambrose, the powerful church father whose accomplishments include converting Augustine, protecting the church against state domination, and consistently practicing oral teaching and exhortation. Like the historical Ambrose, Mose Ambrose protects the ideals of the church in spite of threats from the state, teaches by example and exhorts powerfully, and attempts, with some success, to convert both Grant and Jefferson.

St. Ambrose’s role as both preacher and political figure marks him as a predecessor to the ministers of the Civil Rights movement as well. As Lincoln and Mamiya note, “from the beginning the Civil Rights Movement was anchored in the Black Church” (165), and despite the conflict that arose among factions of the Movement and the varying interpretations of their role that have resulted, black ministers undeniably have been an important political force in American culture. By naming his most effective minister for so significant a political and religious figure and investing his story with elements that resonate with the historical tensions of the Civil Rights Movement, Gaines affirms the importance and effectiveness of the preacher-leaders in the push for social equality.

This affirmation reverses his own earlier position on the minister’s role; Gaines acknowledges that reversal by revising his own characters with his new minister. Reverend Ambrose’s name and his power in the novel invoke the image in Gaines’s first novel, Catherine Carmier (1964), of St. Ambrose, a man who exemplifies dissipation and weakness as he sits drunkenly on the porch at Jackson’s welcome-home party. The first Saint Ambrose in Gaines’s fiction makes a mockery of the historical figure; however, Gaines undercuts his previous condemnation of religion and affirms the works of the specific individual in his portrayal of this small but powerful clergyman.

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The preacher needs all of his power to face the difficulties Jefferson’s situation presents. Out of a sense of duty to Miss Emma and a belief in his religious mission, Reverend Ambrose agrees to help in transforming Jefferson from hog to man before his execution, a seemingly hopeless task. Between Jefferson’s apathy and Grant’s resistance and because of a certain rigidity on the preacher’s part, it seems at first as if Ambrose will end up as his predecessors, disconnected from the real issues facing the community and unable to make any real, positive contribution to the situation. However, because the preacher is able to learn as well as teach, unlike his fictional predecessors, he transcend those limitations and helps Grant overcome his own blindness.

Describing his first efforts with Jefferson and his struggles with Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose, Grant portrays the elderly people as a stiff-necked triumvirate bent on forcing a conventional conception of God and salvation on both him and Jefferson. Most egregiously, in his eyes, they insist that Grant has ruined Jefferson’s hopes for salvation by giving him a portable transistor radio, which Jefferson listens to constantly and which he refuses to turn off when the elderly people visit him. The radio is an important symbol in the novel; the first possession of any monetary value that Jefferson has ever had, it also is, as Grant tries to explain to the preacher, the “only thing that keeps him from thinking he is not a hog” (183) and that keeps him from brooding about his impending death. To the reader, the radio might seem the most natural of gifts, as it moves Jefferson to a level of reaction and self-awareness that he has not previously shown. However, in the religion-driven world where these characters live, it is highly problematic, as Grant well knows. When he first discusses the radio with Jefferson, he acknowledges that when he listens at home he must turn it down in order to avoid offending his aunt because to her and her fellow “old people . . . all music except church music is sinning music” (171).

The idea of secular music, particularly the blues, as sinful is well-established in the African-American tradition; Gaines invokes that image to emphasize the limitedness of conventional Christian thought. He extends that perception through the minister’s comment to Grant that Jefferson “can’t hear me through that wall of sin” (183). The language is important in this instance, as Gaines uses it to raise the question of whose wall Reverend Ambrose encounters. Grant’s explanation of the radio’s value suggests that it is the preacher’s; in the process of articulating that answer, he also disavows any knowledge of what sin is, a claim that causes a great uproar among his elderly religious audience. Despite their protests, he wins the point about the radio and it seems as if his reason has triumphed over religion. His first action on visiting Jefferson the next day, however, is to ask him to talk with Reverend Ambrose and to listen to what he has to say, for the sake of Miss Emma if not for himself. Grant may not entirely believe in what the minister represents, but he resists closing any doors that might work to ease Jefferson’s and Miss Emma’s pain. His ability to work with the minister, even to this limited extent, indicates that he too is overcoming his blind spots, a development that takes Gaines away from the more fixed resistance of young, educated, militant blacks that appears in his earlier work and that characterizes the history of conflict between the SCLC and SNCC.

Grant’s position at this point in the story indicates some softening on his and Gaines’s part towards the church as an institution. Remaining outside the fold himself, Grant willingly suggests it as a possible option for Jefferson as a means of affecting the transformation of the convict from hog to human. At this point, the acceptance of religion is qualified, because despite Grant’s initial efforts to be flexible, the minister seems too rigid to affect any real change. Ultimately, however, Ambrose gets past his reservations and preconceptions about “sin” and makes a plea to Grant that they work together for Jefferson’s benefit. In their discussion, the preacher manifests an awareness and strength that counters the negative impression of his initial rigidity and points to Gaines’s new, more positive vision of religion.

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The coming to terms that Grant and Reverend Ambrose experience might well reflect Gaines’s personal journey from rejection to recognition. However, at this point in the text, the characters’ understanding, unlike the author’s, is incomplete.

A crucial step in their evolution occurs about three weeks before the scheduled execution date, when Grant and Reverend Ambrose argue bitterly about faith, belief, and what can be done for Jefferson. At this point, the teacher still has limited patience with the preacher and sees the connection between their tasks as limited to his asking Jefferson to listen to what the minister has to say. Though he has experienced an emotion “like someone who had just found religion” (186) when Jefferson begins to respond to his efforts, Grant still has no personal use for Christianity. His position at this point reflects the state of mind of young African Americans active in the Civil Rights struggle but not personally committed to religious faith. His viewpoint is broadening, but only slowly. In contrast, and indicating his more rapid development, Reverend Ambrose does not agree with Grant’s methods, but he understands that the teacher is the only one Jefferson will listen to, and he intends to persuade Grant to help ensure Jefferson’s salvation. Listening carefully to Grant’s protestations about his lack of belief and his unwillingness to lie to Jefferson, the minister makes a powerful, eloquent case for his role in the community and demonstrates an understanding of both himself and his congregation that far outreaches Grant’s level of awareness. In the process, he lays the groundwork for the lesson that will ultimately help Grant teach Jefferson more of the things he needs to know—the knowledge that will enable the condemned man to transform his own execution from meaningless death into a redemptive sacrifice.

The major point of Reverend Ambrose’s lesson is the uselessness of Grant’s knowledge of “reading, writing and arithmetic,” which the teacher claims to be the limitations of his responsibility, without any sense of indebtedness to his heritage. Ambrose asks: “What did you learn about your own people? What did you learn about her? . . . No, you not educated, boy . . . You learned your reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic, but you don’t know nothing. You don’t even know yourself” (215). The “her” of Reverend Ambrose’s speech is Tante Lou, and he goes on to explain the sacrifices she has made to get Grant the education the community now calls upon him to use, suffering that she has successfully kept hidden from Grant for years. In the process of explaining about sacrifice, Ambrose also identifies his and Grant’s responsibility to the community. Grant says that he will never lie to Jefferson again to ease him toward death. Reverend Ambrose responds:

That’s why you look down on me, because you know I lie . . . I lie . . . to relieve pain. ‘Cause reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic is not enough . . . They sent you to school to relieve pain . . . and if you have to lie to do it, then you lie . . . And that’s the difference . . . that make me the educated one, and you the gump. I know my people . . . I know they done cheated themself, lied to themself—hoping that one they all love and trust can come back and help relieve the pain. (218)

Although Reverend Ambrose calls himself a liar, “his argument more accurately references faith” (Beavers 177) as he charges Grant with the same responsibility that Miss Jane Pittman articulates as the role of “the One” in the community. In the earlier novel, however, the relief that Jimmy Aaron brings costs him his connection to the quarters when he cannot profess belief in their religion. Just Thomas and the other members of Jane’s church turn from the young man at this point; to them, the gospel is clearly more important than the One. In sharp contrast to this, and as part of the way that Gaines signals the reversal of his position on religion as an
influence in the community, Ambrose understands the primary importance of the One and does whatever is necessary to try to alleviate suffering. His impulse resembles Grant’s on this point, and the resonance between them eventually helps the teacher see the minister’s value. It also moves him to advocate for the preacher on his next visit with Jefferson, an important step in their forging of a collaborative effort and another indication of Gaines’s revision of his view of the sacred/political dichotomy.

In that same argument, Reverend Ambrose responds to Grant’s assertion that he will not “tell [Jefferson] to kneel[, he] will try to help him stand,’” with the pointed question that inspires the title of this essay: “‘You think a man can’t kneel and stand?’” (216). With this remark, Gaines reverses a pattern of belief that extends back through his fiction all the way to “A Long Day in November.” To grasp the full significance of Reverend Ambrose’s words and actions, we must briefly consider the secular/sacred tension inherent in the terms “kneel” and “stand.” “Kneel” has secular connotations of subjugation and submission; in contrast, “stand” evokes images of power and the ability to assert one’s selfhood—a strength that comes only when one has developed personal awareness and security. Throughout most of Gaines’s work, kneeling is a sign of weakness, an admission of defeat in the face of overwhelming social forces. Those who kneel not only fail themselves, however; they also directly impede the efforts of those trying to stand. Reverend Jameson of A Gathering of Old Men, for example, hinders the old men’s bonding process with his calls for prayer and patience. If he persists in kneeling, in other words, then they cannot stand. Only when he is effectively silenced can the men go on about their business.

The emphasis on kneeling as a sign of weakness indicates Gaines’s early rejection of the methods of the SCLC. Repeatedly throughout the course of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the religious leaders of the SCLC and their lay followers used prayer and kneeling as forms of nonviolent civil disobedience, the strategy that contributed to much of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s success as a leader. In repeated instances, the act of kneeling became a means of taking a stand; as tensions between the ministers and many of the young people in the movement mounted, however, kneeling became a target of derision for the generation of protesters more interested in effecting change than in adhering to specific principles of faith. When Stokely Carmichael called for “Black Power” in 1966, he clearly signaled that his kneeling days were over. By consistently mocking his kneeling ministers in his early work and by showing prayer as their useless cure-all response to all challenges (one thinks of Reverend Simmons in “A Long Day in November” in these terms), Gaines aligns himself with the anti-clerical elements of the black community.

In A Lesson, Gaines challenges that anti-religious construct, suggesting that there might be a way for African Americans to perform both actions. Reverend Ambrose teaches Grant and Jefferson that religious humility and secular self-respect need not be mutually exclusive. A humble Christian servant, when faced with adversity and in need of strength, Ambrose can call on God and continue to serve his community, making the personal sacrifice necessary to heal his broken people and to stand up and ask the establishment for what they need—in this case the right to visit Jefferson. He recognizes that he need not always feel powerful to have power, which enables him to see the connection between kneeling and standing that eludes both Grant and many of his fictional predecessors. This sense of possibility casts a new light on the preacher’s function and suggests some value for the community in his institution. Unlike his predecessors, Reverend Ambrose is much more than a useless mouthpiece for outdated ideas that the community must shed in order to heal itself. Instead, he represents a valued part of the communal heritage that holds some hope for its members and a chance to experience the relief from pain that is so valuable in Gaines’s understanding of human connection. Through the positive reinterpretation of the preacher’s function, Gaines also offers the reader new insights
into that history, suggesting in the process that he has revised his sense of the community’s past and its possibility for a more positive and powerful future.

In this pivotal scene, Gaines emphasizes the differences between Ambrose and other ministers in his body of work through a pattern of signifying references to earlier texts that perpetuate his negative ideas. He invokes “The Sky is Gray” just before the minister and the teacher argue when Grant comments that he “could see above the trees how heavy, low, and gray the sky was” (211). The story contains a scene that strikingly parallels Grant’s and Ambrose’s encounter, which Gaines uses to emphasize the power of his new ideas about religion.

In “The Sky,” young James, the narrator, goes to town with his mother, Octavia, to have a rotten tooth pulled; along the way, he learns valuable lessons that push him on toward maturation. One of the most important of these lessons comes in the waiting-room of the dentist’s office, where James and Octavia witness a confrontation between a preacher and a student that directly reflects Gaines’s view of the church at that point. The conflict centers upon the student’s assertion that black people “should question and question and question—question everything” (95), including God. The student’s statement, which resonates with the increasingly militant SNCC rhetoric of the middle 1960s, that Christianity is a tool which white oppressors use to “keep [their] feet on [black people’s] necks” (97) provokes a strong response in the clergyman, a response that shows Gaines’s contempt for the clergy at this point in his development.

Unable to bow or browbeat the student with conventional wisdom and catch phrases like “He works in mysterious ways—wonders to perform’” (95) (a phrase which appears again in A Lesson Before Dying in the mouth of a child), the minister must resort to physical violence in an attempt to assert the strength of his faith and his God. The preacher calls on the young man to stand up and then slaps him brutally to the ground. Though he falls at first, the student does not grovel. In fact, his bold responses to the preacher’s blows—first “’You forgot the other cheek’” and then, finally, “’That hasn’t changed a thing’” (98)—cause the preacher to flee in distress and embarrassment. The student recognizes his strength, and the reader sees in his position a degree of power that the minister cannot attain no matter how hard he beats his opponent.

In historical terms, the conflict twists a central premise of the Civil Rights Movement as the minister, ostensibly the representative of the nonviolent civil disobedience model of protest, loses his temper and betrays his fundamental beliefs as he tries to beat the student into submission. That he can neither win the argument nor remain true to himself suggests the minister’s weakness. By contrast, the student remains rational and self-possessed throughout the encounter and stands up proudly to the now violent minister. In establishing the student’s right to the moral high ground Gaines aligns himself against the self-righteousness of the minister and his kind, celebrating instead the power and strength the student represents, effectively arguing in the process that the two are irreconcilable.

Gaines also reinforces his condemnation of the church through young James’ reaction. Despite the student’s bold words in “The Sky,” something has changed: in the aftermath of the exchange, James wants to be “just like him” (100). In having his young protagonist embrace the contemptuous view of religion in this encounter, Gaines clearly illustrates his negative perspective on Christianity and emphasizes the necessity of confronting the church as an institution. He also suggests that this rejection of the church holds the promise of hope for future generations of African Americans. On his way to manhood, James must see that the student’s way is more useful to him than the minister’s. This recognition and perpetuation of the student’s perspective further intensifies the validation of the anti-clerical perspective and widens the rift between student and preacher in a manner that offers little hope for any sort of meaningful reconnection.
Gaines invokes and revises this moment of violence in *A Lesson* to illustrate his new position on religion as a communal force. Whereas the unnamed minister of “The Sky is Gray” rejects the student’s education and tries to beat him into submission, Reverend Ambrose comes to the teacher to ask his help in getting Jefferson to pray for salvation. When Grant, like the student in the dentist’s office, says that his education will not let him participate in that, Reverend Ambrose feels rage in the face of Grant’s attitude; however, he channels that rage into a positive avenue. He does not resort to violence—indeed, it is Grant who needs “all [his] willpower to keep from knocking [Reverend Ambrose’s hand] off” his shoulder (216). In “The Sky is Gray,” the minister stands helpless with terror of the student’s education. Reverend Ambrose, however, not only does not fear education, he understands its efficacy in the community and teaches Grant something very important about its proper use. Rather than try to beat his adversary into compliance, he explains the relationship between power and submission and leaves the teacher with something more to think about than a swollen lip and a trickle of blood. In his willingness to work with Grant, his ability to control himself, and his success in teaching the teacher, Reverend Ambrose reverses all of the shortcomings of his predecessor and offers the hope for some sort of meaningful connection designed to transcend all of the previous barriers set up between groups within the community.

Unlike the student in “The Sky is Gray,” whose encounter with the preacher leaves him even more sure that there is nothing he can definitively trust or know, a nihilism he expresses by declaring “the wind is pink, the grass is black,” Grant comes away from this encounter with Reverend Ambrose somehow more able to contribute positively to Jefferson’s transformation. His predecessor, in explaining his position to the other occupants of the dentist’s waiting room, says despondently that he hopes that “the ones who come after will have your faith—if not in your God, then in something else, something definite that they can lean on. I haven’t anything” (“The Sky” 102). Though Grant is not yet ready to start going to service again at the end of the novel, he has something: hope and a growing faith in both Jefferson and his community, faith that comes largely through the work he has done in the jail—work that the minister undeniably shapes in the conversation about kneeling and standing. Furthermore, as the story closes, he has his students kneeling by their desk out of respect for Jefferson’s sacrifice. He will not join them himself, but he admits the usefulness of kneeling to this younger generation and encourages, even requires, them to embrace it as the appropriate response to this moment of communal suffering. Having been valued by the minister, Grant can now admit the possibility that he should value his counterpart, or at the very least that he should not stand between the minister and the community when Ambrose might have a useful solution to share.

Ambrose’s cutting, insightful assessment of his role and value in the community, and his clear explanation of Grant’s responsibility as the plantation’s teacher, marks the fullest development of Gaines’s new position on religion. He supports that position in the final chapter, which recounts events on the day of Jefferson’s execution. It is Reverend Ambrose, not Grant, who has the strength to go with Jefferson to the end. Even though he has helped Jefferson walk to the electric chair as “the strongest man there” (253), Grant lacks the courage to stand with him and support him at the end; only Reverend Ambrose can do that. The minister is afraid, but he overcomes his fear and recognizes that his needs cannot come first in this situation. The power of his example is reinforced in the change in Grant as he goes back into the church-school and turns to face his kneeling children and to begin really teaching them. That movement, signified not as a return to the classroom, as it is elsewhere in the novel, but as a return to “the church” (256) shows us that Grant might be able to move toward accepting the building’s other function and begin the work of relieving pain Reverend Ambrose has so convincingly suggested he should be helping with. In that recognition, Gaines emphasizes the value of both religion and education to the community and suggests that the hope for fusion the two men are working toward represents the best possibility for the community’s future.
Gaines extends his signifyin(g) revision of his former position on religion in the scene where Grant listens to the children telling their Bible verses at the start of the school day. He says:

I had heard them all many times... "In my Father's house there are many mansions." "Jesus wept." And on and on and on. I had listened to them almost six years, and I knew who would say what... I knew, too, which of them would do something for themselves and which of them never would... So each day I listened for a moment, then turned it off and planned the rest of the day. (A Lesson 33-34).

This passage invokes the name of Gaines's most explicit treatment of the Civil Rights Movement and suggests added dimensions to his argument in A Lesson Before Dying, elements that expand on both his views of the ministry and his understanding of the possibility for real human connection within the black community.

In My Father's House tells the story of Reverend Phillip Martin, a prominent Civil Rights leader and the pastor of Solid Rock Baptist Church in St. Adrienne, who is personally weak and hypocritical. Like another famous religious hypocrite in the African-American tradition, Gabriel Grimes, of James Baldwin's Go Tell It On The Mountain, Martin is apparently a pillar of the community but once was indolent, irreverent, and irresponsible, fathering children and leaving their mothers to pay the consequences. The novel recounts what happens when one of these children appears from the past seeking revenge on his absentee father. The young man, whose real name is Etienne but who calls himself Robert X, bears a deep and obvious hatred for his father. His unnamning of himself indicates both his sense of isolation and the rage that motivates him to come back and kill his father after his sister is raped. Robert X seeks his manhood, which he believes disappeared when he called on God instead of killing his sister's rapist, who happened also to be his mother's boyfriend. Unable to live with himself and finally aware, after a conversation with Philip, that his biological father's death will not affect his manhood, Robert X drowns himself, leaving Phillip alone to deal with the consequences of his actions.

The young man's spiritual isolation and eventual suicide parallel his father's own self-destructive behavior as he tries to reconcile his present and his past. Because of his excessive pride and the weakness of his faith, Martin shuts out his parishioners and his God, destroying everything in an attempt to reach the son whose name he no longer knows. In exchange for Robert's release from jail, he betrays his parishioners by agreeing to halt a Civil Rights protest against Albert Chenal, the racist storekeeper who exploits the black population and who represents the last vestiges of the old order the minister has worked so hard to dismantle. Caught in this betrayal by his peers on the Civil Rights Committee, Martin must step down from his leadership position and, potentially, from his pulpit.

In the aftermath of that announcement, he flees St. Adrienne for Bayonne, where he hopes to find his old drinking buddy, Chippo Simon, who has news of Robert X's mother and who he hopes will remember Robert X's real name. Journeying through the underworld of bars, liquor stores, and pool halls, Martin encounters a number of significant people from his old life, all of whom call him back to their dissipated ways. Though he initially resists, when he finds out that Robert X has killed himself, the preacher "wants to turn his back on his present life and return to drinking, fighting, and whoring" (Shelton 344). Though he ultimately does not take that path, we see through his actions the weakness of his faith and the hollowness of his convictions. Martin's hypocrisy and unenlightened self-interest, which surface from beneath the shell of his religiosity, combine into a powerful indictment of the clergy's role in the community; that
Gaines invokes and revises this text in *A Lesson* indicates how greatly his view of the church as communal force has changed.

Gaines’s assessment of the Civil Rights Movement’s value is central to *In My Father’s House,* and he conveys a largely negative impression, at least with regard to the politicized minister’s role. He articulates a history of abuse through the speeches of several characters, most notably committee member Harold Mills, that show the real need for change; however, in his portrayal of Martin’s choice between personal and communal history, he questions the preacher’s ability to address the grievances effectively. In the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, the movement appears to be spinning its wheels and losing the interest and support of a large segment of the African-American community in the process. At different points in the novel, both blacks and whites suggest the time for protest has passed and that, as the white sheriff Nolan says to Phillip Martin, “‘[w]hen they nailed that coffin down on King, that demonstrating was over with. All you doing now is bullshitting the people, that’s all. It’s over with.’” Astonishingly, given the prominence of his position in the struggle and the fire with which he exhorts a crowd planning a march (a march he is about to sell out for personal reasons), Martin himself recognizes the validity of the sheriff’s position in his response: “‘Maybe for the young . . . But the old—that’s all they have’” (92). Far from the power of his earlier living room oration, this admission speaks pointedly to the weaknesses of both the man and his program. As his approach mirrors that advocated and practiced by the SCLC, Martin’s inadequacy suggests a critique of the nonviolent movement and a reassessment of the ministers’ value to action for social change.

Gaines intensifies his critique of the SCLC and notes his preference for another approach to effecting change in his picture of the community’s reaction to the minister. The doubt about Martin’s usefulness, for instance, manifests itself prominently among the younger generation of African Americans; the most vocal critics of this group are Jonathan Robillard, his militant assistant pastor, and Shepherd Lewis, the leader of a cadre of school teachers who feel that Martin’s day has clearly passed. Each of these characters resonates with factions of the Civil Rights Movement that were vocal in their opposition to the SCLC. Robillard, for instance, who resents Martin’s reliance on white supporters and whose speech to the gathering at the minister’s house echoes Stokely Carmichael’s call for Black Power, represents the faction of younger, more militant ministers active in the movement such as the members of the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC) who sided with SNCC in the wake of the escalating tensions between Carmichael and King (Hamilton 123-24).

The evocation of the NCBC complicates Gaines’s portrayal of the minister figure in interesting ways. First and foremost, it speaks to the historical reality of the Civil Rights Movement, which was hardly monolithic in its nature or the specifics of its agenda. Second, it reinforces Gaines’s opinions on the appropriate course to take for gaining control and empowerment. The NCBC was one of the sources for the New Black Theology that developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a sort of religious version of the Black Aesthetic; the New Black Theology argued that African Americans needed to understand Christianity from a black perspective (Hamilton 146-47). Throughout *In My Father’s House,* black characters including Phillip Martin ruminate over the influence of white benefactors who try to guide the movement; in every case, the characters conclude the white perspective and the white voice are invalid. Gaines clearly sees it as invalid as well, as he demonstrates by having one of the supposedly sensitive whites call Jonathan “boy” in a moment of stress (42). In his view, effective communication between the races is neither possible nor even desirable; the Civil Rights Movement is best run without white interference, and African Americans need to attend to themselves before they try to build bridges across the racial divide, he seems to be saying.
He reinforces the point by having Jonathan, the voice of Black Power and racial isolation, replace Martin as president of the St. Adrienne Civil Rights Committee at the end of the novel. Gaines will reverse that position on racial harmony in *A Lesson Before Dying*, when he shows Paul and Grant forming a bond at the end of the novel; to some extent in that novel, the teacher can bond with the white deputy because of the work that he does with the black preacher. In *In My Father’s House*, Gaines emphasizes the rift between the clergy and the militant teachers, stressing the fundamental difference in their world views and validating the teachers’ point as they suggest the irrelevance of the minister’s way. Indeed, the case is so persuasive that Martin himself momentarily adheres to it in the aftermath of learning Robert X has killed himself. He tells Shepherd that he is wise to not have faith and says that his is “a good way to be, boy. The only way to be. That way you never get hurt” (210). Though the minister wavers away from this position in the final moments of the text, that he even adopts it for a moment suggests the weakness of what is supposed to be his support system.

This brief statement about the avoidance of pain and the denial of faith strikes a chord that Gaines reverses in *A Lesson Before Dying*, where Ambrose clings firmly to his faith and demonstrates to Grant both how and why it is useful and important to him. Unafraid of being hurt, Ambrose focuses instead on how he can relieve pain. Furthermore, he convinces the teacher to come towards his position, rather than casting off everything that has sustained him and moving to Grant’s desperation. Though he is small of stature and lacks the brute force that Phillip Martin exudes as he fights to escape Chippo and Shepherd at the end of the novel, Ambrose has a strength of character and conviction that far outstrips his predecessor’s. He has not held the position that Martin has, but he is making a positive contribution to efforts for social change in sincere ways that cannot be undercut. The weakness and inefficacy of the minister that Gaines shows in Martin’s story disappears in Ambrose’s.

Gaines further emphasizes the differences between the men by treating one of his recurring motifs for strength in both texts. In Martin’s proclamation about how he has changed since abandoning Robert X’s mother, *In My Father’s House* provides another perspective on the whole issue of “kneeling” and “standing” as Gaines interprets it prior to *A Lesson*. Calling himself a victim of the social system under which he lived, Martin is in fact a victimizer until he “pray[s] for [God] to make [him] a man,” which enables him to “stand today” (102). Ironically, when faced with the reality of his old life, Reverend Martin in fact cannot stand, a failure figured both in his falling when he first sees Robert X across a crowded room and in his final position of supplication on Chippo Simon’s bed. Furthermore, in agreeing to spare Albert Chenal, Martin directly refuses to stand up and take the lead in his congregation’s assertion of their equality, once again showing the power he brags about is a figment of his imagination. Unfortunately, in his obsession with that physical power to stand, he has apparently forgotten that “kneel” also has positive sacred connotations of devotion and dedication, the attitude that, given his position in the community, is supposed to renew his strength and give him the ability to help others. Reverend Martin sees kneeling and standing as canceling each other out, a conflicted attitude that makes his ministry difficult, if not impossible. He can never function for his community as Reverend Ambrose does for his, because he does not understand his proper role.

*In My Father’s House* also makes specific reference to the Bible verse from which its title comes. After his collapse at the Civil Rights meeting Robert X attends, a fall which his white advisors attribute to exhaustion, Reverend Martin stays home from church to rest and to think about what to do next. In a quandary, he turns to his Bible for comfort, coming upon the same verse that Grant tunes out during morning recitation in *A Lesson*:

The Bible on his desk was opened to the fourteenth chapter of John. He had chosen today’s sermon from that chapter. . . . “Let not your hearts
be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go—” He stopped . . . Who could he go to? Who would believe him? (In My Father’s 54).

This passage illustrates the flaws in Phillip Martin’s approach to his profession. As his subsequent actions indicate, unlike the speaker, Christ, whom his parishioners expect him to emulate, the minister is not one in whom they can believe, and he does not tell them only things which “are so”; furthermore, he does not go before them to prepare the way but instead turns on them and blocks their path to equality with his personal machinations. Though he is a figure of power to members of his congregation, he has no community with them; throughout the novel, Martin repeatedly fails to connect with others who need him or whom he needs because he has no idea how to reach out or to really give of himself. Indeed, the lack of community is so great that he cannot tell anyone about Robert’s identity or discuss possible responses to his presence with them. These failures spur Martin to his treacherous action, as he goes without guidance to Nolan to save his son and betrays his fellow movement workers in the process.

Martin’s unenlightened self-interest is one of his most contemptible features and the clearest indicator of his falseness. Though many members of the Civil Rights committee have children in jail, they are willing to work for the greater good, a greater good that he has been preaching to them for years. He, on the other hand, can see no greater good than what he needs and wants and destroys the faith of his followers and the chance to make a difference in the community in a futile attempt to make up for something he cannot change. His social and spiritual significance appears great, but there are no sustaining connections supporting that image. By emphasizing his lack of human connection, Gaines also indicates the severe limitations of his value to the community. The church is not a sustaining institution in In My Father’s House, and the minister’s relevance disappears in the face of his personal desires. Though Phillip Martin learns a lesson from Robert X’s death, it comes too late for it to make any real difference to him or to his community.

Martin’s inability to draw comfort from this Biblical passage also illustrates a fundamental flaw in his faith, a weakness he shares with Grant prior to the teacher’s “conversion” experience. His is not necessarily a religious conversion; it is, rather, a recognition of the value of the church to Jefferson and the community during this time of horrible injustice and suffering. At the points in the novels where Gaines cites the verse, though, neither man wants to (or can) hear or grasp the verse’s message, and neither can live a life affirming its point. Nevertheless, whereas Reverend Martin’s weakness and confusion ultimately lead him to near destruction and result in his having to “start again” (214) in what seems at best a qualified resolution of his pain that bears no promise for his community, Grant finally returns to the church/school to take up his role as teacher, to use what he has learned to be better at what he does, and to participate in the shared responsibility of healing the community’s pain, an act made even more necessary by Jefferson’s execution.

Despite his initial resistance to the minister’s teachings, Grant has learned something about the positive value of sacrifice through this situation. In helping Jefferson, he does things that he was previously unwilling to do, things that he sees as worthwhile in order to help the condemned man. In the end, he is better prepared to continue the work he has often longed to flee. Perhaps he will do even more effective work now that he has seen past himself and recognized the value of belief, even if he cannot yet fully believe himself. In his acceptance of this place in the social order, which the minister has assigned him, Grant reminds us of the power inherent in Ambrose’s position and reiterates, through his recognition of Grant’s newly
rediscovered value to the community, what the church has to offer as well. In this final state, he represents the healing of a deep and long-lived rift in the African-American community which Gaines has portrayed throughout his canon. The teacher and the preacher find a way to resolve their differences in the service of the common good, a resolution that enables them to help lay the foundations for a stronger group.

Those foundations also offer members of the African-American community a chance to move beyond the racial boundaries and to forge human connections with whites, a development that provides the reader some hope. Gaines builds on this new power he assigns to religion by emphasizing a final relationship between Grant and Paul, the white deputy who has facilitated his visits with Jefferson and who comes to “bear witness” to Jefferson’s strength and bravery as he delivers the news of Jefferson’s death. He also comes with a request: “Allow me to be your friend Grant Wiggins” (255). This desire, inspired by the powerful example of Jefferson’s humanity, signals a radical reversal of Gaines’s earlier position on the potential for harmony between races. Throughout most of his body of work, black/white interactions are characterized at best by a sense of armed neutrality and more often than not give way to open hostility. The rare exceptions appear in “The Sky is Gray,” where James’s mother and the white storekeeper who helps her come to some mutual respect, and A Gathering of Old Men, where Sheriff Mapes offers Charlie Biggs some modicum of respect and recognition of his manhood in the moments before Biggs and Luke Will destroy each other. In both of these cases, however, there is no promise for future relationship or broader change. The encounter with the storekeeper is a one-time event, and Charlie Biggs is dead. In A Lesson, however, Grant invites Paul to return to his school some day to tell the children of Jefferson’s bravery. As Herman Beavers notes, “at that moment we see the collaboration which could not save Jefferson’s life, but which in the present provides the resources for others to achieve a different outcome” (178). There is hope for their forging a personal bond that crosses the racial boundaries that have so much to do with Jefferson’s suffering and death.

This change occurs just before Grant turns, in tears, to reenter the church and begin teaching again. The convergence of the racial harmony, one of the goals of many participants in the Civil Rights struggle, and religious imagery functions to strengthen both and also extends the impact of Gaines’s new vision of religion as social force. The changes that Grant is making and that he and Paul have the chance to build upon connect, in many ways, to Grant’s gradual development of belief. This in turn brings us back to the minister, whose powerful faith and forceful argument enable him to reach the teacher so that they can help the condemned prisoner die a man. Though the pain of Jefferson’s death is undeniable, these two men are equipped to help their community by easing that pain, thereby fulfilling the function of the One and acting out the role that Ambrose so clearly understands and so eloquently articulates. Furthermore, in working together the two men suggest a possibility for collaboration and mutual support that affirms the work of sometimes conflicted but ultimately sympathetic groups who struggled to redress the historical grievances that Gaines treats so effectively in his fiction.

Ultimately, then, Ambrose has in some ways saved both Jefferson and Grant, a victory that sets him apart from all of Gaines’s other ministers. Simpler in appearance and smaller in stature than his predecessors, Ambrose nonetheless possesses a strength of character and a largeness of spirit that enables him to do good. Looking over Gaines’s body of work prior to A Lesson, the idea of a minister actually doing good seems ludicrous and impossible. In this novel, however, the church functions to sustain the community and provides them a valuable service in the process. The power developing within the community also enables the possibility of communication across racial boundaries, another formerly unthinkable result in Gaines’s fictional world. With A Lesson, he reconsiders and revises his assessment of the church and its benefits to the community, declaring finally the possibility of belief and harmony that might eventually
lead to the eradication of the need for sacrificial figures like Jefferson, Charlie Biggs, and Jimmy Aaron. With human connections more powerfully established, the community can liberate itself from the need for the One and thereby embrace a more hopeful vision of the future that allows for religious faith. The “one” can now be the community itself, an idea that signals a powerful new direction for Gaines’s work. This position opens the possibility for an even deeper, more penetrating assessment of how the community’s heritage affects the development and preservation of African-American culture, a change the extends the already impressive range and power of Gaines’s fiction.

NOTES

1. As Lee Papa states, “Although he rarely addresses religion explicitly, religion becomes a means through which Gaines’s characters are defined or define themselves” (187). Papa’s assessment aligns him with numerous other critics examining religion in Gaines’s novels, including Herman Beavers, Keith Byerman, Marcia Gaudet, John W. Roberts, Audrey Vinson, and Frank Shelton. For all of these critics, Gaines’s celebration of the spiritual turns on a rejection of organized religion, a pattern that unarguably reappears throughout the works up until A Lesson Before Dying. Indeed, it is precisely the consistency of this attitude that makes the changes in A Lesson so radical. Given the extensive scholarship already in print on Gaines’s rejection of the church, I will not repeat that established argument here but focus instead on what he does differently in A Lesson.

2. For a detailed account of SCLC/SNCC conflict, see Garrow. For a useful discussion of Gaines’s evocation of elements of the Civil Rights Movement, see Beavers (67-103) and (127-80, passim). Though Beavers does not refer specifically to the SCLC/SNCC tensions, his commentary on the portrayal of the Civil Rights Movement in Gaines’s fiction illuminates several significant elements of that history that the author explores.

3. In questioning the value of white-defined Christianity to the black community, Gaines joins a tradition that dates back to Frederick Douglass, whose emphasis on the difference between the religious practices of the slaveholder and so-called “true Christianity” is a refrain in the 1845 Narrative. Like Gaines, Douglass advocates the substitution of a community-based belief system; in his case the root that Sandy Jenkins provides him as defense against attacks by Mr. Covey. Douglass’s devout slave master. Perhaps the clearest parallel to this in Gaines’s canon comes in A Gathering of Old Men, where Charlie Biggs claws into the earth and finds the strength to go home and stand, much as Douglass does. For a more thorough assessment of that scene, see Papa (189).


5. “The Sky is Gray” and A Gathering of Old Men ultimately allow for qualified mutual respect between individuals across racial lines, but the connections are tentative at best. More typically, in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, efforts at interracial friendships lead to betrayal, as Jane learns when she befriends Albert Cluvez, who ultimately murders her adopted son, Ned. In sharp contrast to this, the potential for harmony evident in A Lesson Before Dying far outreaches anything that precedes it.

6. This view of the African-American minister is not unique to Gaines, of course; in fact, the black folk tradition is replete with stories and jokes about materialistic, self-serving ministers whose parishioners pay the cost of indulging their appetites. For a representative sample of these jokes and stories, see Hughes and Bontemps, “Do You Call That A Preacher” (139-62).

7. The concept of “the One,” with its obvious messianic overtones, also resonates interestingly with the history of the Civil Rights Movement. The One is the designated person, chosen by the community to ease their pain and to lead them to freedom. The One is important primarily because the community defines him. As Miss Jane explains to Jimmy Aaron when he asks her for help, “People and time bring forth leaders . . . Leaders don’t bring forth people. The people and the time brought King; King didn’t bring the people. What Miss Rosa Parks did, everybody
wanted to do. They just needed one person to do it first because they all couldn’t do it at the same time; then they needed King to show them what to do next. But King couldn’t do a thing before Miss Rosa Parks refused to give that white man her seat’’ (228). This position reflects a central point of SNCC’s agenda: that leadership should come from within the community (Garrow 396). In using the idea of the One to affirm SNCC policy and in making specific reference to the relationship between the movement and its leader, Gaines here confirms his support for the student perspective. In A Lesson Before Dying, he modifies that view as he shows how the preacher and the teacher collaborate to show the community how to heal its own pain, a position that resolves the earlier conflict in positive terms and opens the way for the new understanding of religion, activism, and community that develops in the novel.

8. See Beavers (94), for a discussion of Gaines’s characterization of leadership in the post-King movement.

9. For a good discussion of the hopelessness in the ending of this novel, see Shelton (344-45).

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