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## Racism Recognized and the Reformation of the South in Ernest Gaines'

La Toya Session  
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Racism Recognized and the Reformation of the South in Ernest Gaines'  
*A Gathering of Old Men*

A Thesis

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University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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by

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### **Abstract**

According to Ernest Gaines' personal experiences as a Southerner, without addressing the history of slavery, the quest for human dignity becomes meaningless. The discourses and the ideologies of the characters in *A Gathering of Old Men* represent a call for social change. *A Gathering of Old Men* is however, more than just a novel about whites dominating blacks; it is a novel about the fight for humanity in spite of the threat of a new social order. The social repercussions of slavery and the denial of black manhood are central issues in *A Gathering of Old Men*, but Gaines also exhibits ways in which the demand for a social change in our society can bring about racial harmony.

Keywords: slavery, dignity, discourses, ideologies, social repercussions, *Gathering of Old Men*, social order, manhood, racial harmony

## Introduction

William Faulkner once said, “We cannot choose freedom established on a hierarchy of degrees of freedom, or on a caste system of inequality like military rank. We must be free not because we claim freedom, but because we practice it” (*Harper’s Magazine* 1956). Faulkner made a plea for social change during a time when a racial caste system known as Jim Crow promoted racial discrimination. The Jim Crow Era, which began during 1876 and lasted until 1965, was a shameful period in American history, and it thickened the color line as blacks and whites were not permitted to use the same public facilities such as restrooms or transportation, nor were they allowed to attend the same public schools.

During the Jim Crow Era opportunities for blacks were nonexistent. However, many blacks risked their lives trying to escape the hardships that haunted the South while others were forced to endure the oppression which lay deep in its seams. This system of racial segregation and disfranchisement limited economic and physical freedom and branded African Americans an inferior status. But like slavery, the Jim Crow Era came to an end, leaving only its ghost to torture those left behind. Raina Kelly noted in a *Newsweek* editorial, “Play the Race Card,” that “Black skin has meant something very specific in this country for hundreds of years. It has meant ‘less than,’ ‘not as good as,’ ‘separate than’...It has never meant ‘better than...’ Ernest Gaines offers an artistic representation of such signs of injustice in his novel *A Gathering of Old Men*, which is set in the South during a time when societal fissures of the Jim Crow Era gradually evolved into an open crevasse. The novel is set during the 1970’s on a Louisiana sugarcane plantation. A Cajun

farmer is shot to death and seventeen armed black men and a white woman arrive at the crime scene, each one claiming responsibility for the murder. But the community only looks upon one of the men as the culprit. Gaines, a native Southerner, is able to capture this sense of history as he grew up along the Louisiana bayou.

Gaines narrates this story from each character's perspective and applies the dialect that is familiar to him. Gaines had also a special connection to the land and to the people that he wrote about in his fictionalized town called Bayonne, which he placed near Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In a taped interview with Michael Sartisky, Gaines reflects on the oral tradition that helped to transmit the culture orally and maintain the memories of the past: "My folks were at the same place for a hundred years. I knew someone to whom I dedicated *A Gathering of Old Men*; he knew my grandparents' grandparents. They had worked this land over and over for five generations that worked the land" (Lowe 261). In Gaines' fiction, he is determined to preserve the voices of the South that help to tell the struggles of African Americans. Gaines observes: "I wanted to hear those simple religious songs, those simple prayers—that true devotion...And I wanted to hear that Louisiana dialect—that combination of English, Creole, Cajun, Black. For me there's no more beautiful sound anywhere" (Babbs 3).

Through these voices Gaines is able to hear how the evil spirit of slavery embedded itself within the souls of those who yearned to tell, in the words of the old Negro Spiritual, how they got over. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the characters are also determined to cast away the slave mentality which has kept them in bondage and to free themselves from the shackles of white supremacy. Gaines allows the men to be mentally and physically liberated from their submission to the Southern code of de facto racism.

Collectively and individually, the old men become determined to dismiss the old regime. Gaines intertwines the social repercussions of slavery with a new definition of black masculinity, and gradually unveils to his readers the mediation of racial attitudes.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter one is geared toward analyzing the skeletons of the past, such as the slave quarters, which lie on the grounds of the plantation. The slave quarters added to the inhuman treatment of blacks during the pre and post Civil War era. Chapter two explains the black man's fight for manhood and his struggle to maintain his dignity in the novel and in relation to the history of America. Chapter three analyzes various signs of racial mediation within the novel and concludes with the story's connection to the Civil Rights Movement and how it is evident that the fight for equality that Gaines struggled to express in his literary work has come full circle with the election of our country's first black president, Barack Obama.



## Chapter 1

### Shackles of Slavery

*Five score years ago, a great American in whose symbolic shadow we stand signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity. But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.*

*-Dr. Martin Luther King*

Ernest Gaines strategically weaves the social repercussion of slavery into the exposition of the plot as the slave quarters are an intricate part of the novel. Prior to the Civil War and long after slavery ended, the slave quarters were used to house blacks on the plantation. These living areas were like mouse traps set by slaveholders to keep black men, women and children as their property. The slave quarters resembled the framework of a common antebellum building. They were normally two rooms wide with a veranda on their façade. Each room housed one African American family. Cramped conditions as such added to the inhuman treatment blacks had to endure during the pre and post Civil War Era. Slaves were also limited to which crops they could cultivate, when they could fish, and where they could hunt, and they were still required to perform most of the manual, skilled, and domestic tasks on the plantation (Schwartz 37). Gaines makes this evident in the novel when one of the men affirms, “Beau Bouton was leasing the plantation from the Marshall family. Beau and his family had been leasing all the land the past twenty-five years. The very same land we had worked, our people had worked, our people’s people had worked since the time of slavery” (43). The labor that was performed under duress left not only a physical but a mental scar on their psyche.

Gaines allows the characters in his fictionalized world to come face to face with their past. He returns them to the quarters where horrific scenes of physical abuse that were inflicted upon them by their masters were vividly recalled. Rooster, one of the men, reflects, "I was thinking now about all the hurt I had suffered, the insults my wife had suffered right in front of my face. I was thinking about what all the old people musta gone through even before me" (181). Gaines captures the essence which rests behind the old men's reasoning for taking blame for the killing. For so many years they had been defenseless against the onslaught of racist brutality; it was time to take vengeance on a past they had inherited, not only for themselves, but for all those that had been abused and stripped of their human rights. For the old men, it was a time to finally heal the wounds of the past. These deep wounds were buried in the soil where the quarters had once stood. Evident scars of whip and chain beatings and of forced labor were deeply rooted not only on their bodies but within the souls of the old black men. Johnny Paul, one of the old black men, recalls, "You had to be there to be able to see it and don't hear it now. But I was here then, and I don't see it now, and that's why I did it. I did it for them back there under them trees. I did it 'cause that tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard, and I was scared if I didn't do it, one day that tractor was go'n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all the proof that we ever was" (94). Horrid conditions within the living quarters of the African American community are also revealed. But although slavery had ended over a century ago, oppression continued to haunt the lives of African Americans even from their graves.

Images of the cemetery in *A Gathering of Old Men* depict the injustices committed against men and women who once cultivated the land while their slave masters reaped the

benefits. For example, Tucker, another one of the old men in the story, tells how a white mob beats his brother after he defeats them in a contest between his mules and their tractor. Tucker asks, “How can flesh and blood and nigger win against white man and machine? So they beat him. They took stalks of cane and they beat him and beat him” (98). Gabel agonizes over the electrocution of his mentally challenged son after he was accused of raping a white woman: “He wasn’t but sixteen years old, half out of his mind, still they put him in the ‘lectric chair on the word of a poor white trash....Told us we could have a undertaker waiting at the back door if we wanted him as soon as it was over with. Is that something to say to a mother? Something to say to a father?” (101). Unfortunately, those that inflicted such excruciating pain and suffering were able to escape prosecution thanks to the innately racist and repressive Jim Crow.

“Jim Crow” was by no means a tyrant that put into practice laws of racial segregation. Jim Crow was actually a term that evolved as a caricature of black life. But as time progressed during the Reconstruction period and blacks’ right to vote or right to live a torture-free life were allotted protection from infringement, the Jim Crow term began to take on a new face of profound inequalities against African Americans. Leon J. Litwack notes in his article titled “Jim Crow Blues” that “Jim Crow took on additional force and meaning to denote the subordination and separation of black people in the South, much of it codified and much of it still enforced by custom, habit, and violence” (7). Whites were threatened by the idea that blacks could one day be in power so they sought out other measures to uphold the absolute power of whites. Jim Crow laws legalized the dehumanization of blacks, despite the fact that the Emancipation

Proclamation had been signed by President Abraham Lincoln fifty years earlier to free blacks that lived in states not under Union control. Under the Jim Crow laws, blacks were denied the right to vote and were not allowed to use the same public facilities as their white counterparts. Ironically, even the criminal justice system, whose practice consisted of upholding social control, deterring crime, and protecting individuals from those that intended to inflict harm, also perpetuated racial inequality against blacks. Crimes such as lynching went unpunished. Gaines allows Tucker to reveal this when he questions Sheriff Mapes about the absence of law when his brother was brutally beaten to death: ‘Where was the law?’ he said, looking up at Mapes. He was crying now. ‘Where was the law? Law said he cut in on the tractor, and he was the one who started the fight. That’s law for a nigger’ (97). In addition, Beulah recalls when Fix had a hand in the drowning of two children while Mapes had tried to forget such malicious activities ever took place: “Now ain’t that just like white folks?... Black people get lynched, get drowned, get shot, guts all hanging out—and here he come up with ain’t no proof who did it. The proof was them two children, laying there in them two coffins. That’s proof enough they was dead” (108). Unfortunately, this was the price many had to pay in order for the whites to preserve inequitable race relations. Litwack says, “Between 1890 and 1917, some two to three black men and women were hanged, burned at stake, or quietly murdered each week” (10). In *A Gathering Of Old Men*, the men meet up at the cemetery to pay homage to those that died before them before heading to Mathu’s house to profess guilt for the death of Beau Bouton. Gaines allows the cemetery to serve as a place for the men to gather and reflect on the painful memories that lie underneath the dirt where they stood.

In the cemetery, unmarked graves spoke of disobedient slaves that were killed by their

overseers and left to rot wherever their bodies fell. It was rare for slaves to have a proper burial or to even be provided a tombstone. As a result of this, slaves were secretly buried during night-time torch-lit ceremonies. In order for families to discern one grave from another, sticks, wood, or even slabs were provided as markers. Matthew Wilson in Bradley's *Chaneyville Incident* notes the degradation of human bodies in the cemetery by another member of the human race: "Where bodies of the dead are buried is not an act of conscious evasion of the evidence of crime for the slaveholder...but an act of not even deliberate forgetting—like burying an animal somewhere in the backyard" (Wardi 38). It was this lack of regard for life that lingered in the minds of the old men. Overgrown weeds, fallen trees, and weathered tombstones that toppled over were a result of more than just time and erosion.

The men quickly recognized it was a result of poorly maintained grave yards, which housed the remains of family and friends who once toiled over the land. However, this lack of maintenance gradually erased more than the location of the ancestors' remains; it erased their history and left no one to speak of it as the old men had moved away from the Quarters. Cherry Bello, one of the old men, shares the men's visit to the graveyard: "We went to our different family plots. But we wasn't too sure about all the graves. If they had been put there the last twenty, twenty-five years, yes, then we could tell for sure. But, say, if they had been put there forty, fifty years ago, it was no way we could tell if we was looking at the right grave for the right person" (46). This assembly gave the men a purpose to root out the past and develop a plan that would allow them to preserve the dignity of those that had gone before them and enable them to reclaim their

own. Even Gaines in his own life sets out on a similar journey: “I must write only about what my roots are, really, and my roots are there. My wife and friends and I are trying to save the cemetery where my people are buried; my aunt who raised me and who most greatly influenced my life, I suppose, as well as others is buried there in an unmarked grave” (Lowe 298). Unearthing the barriers of slavery becomes a part of the old men’s mission.

## Chapter 2

### Black Man's Quest for Manhood

*I am invisible. Misunderstood, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or fragments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.*

*- Ralph Ellison*

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines reconstructs the black men's status of "manhood" that had been given to them by the white dominant culture. In the old men's efforts to undergo this profound change they must, however, be aware of various social institutions that have controlled them. Gaines reflects, "You must understand that in this country the black man has been pushed into the position where he is not supposed to be a man. This is one of the things that the white man has tried to deny the black man ever since he brought him here in chains" (Lowe 114). But many blacks began to risk their own lives fighting against cruel and unjust tactics. Gaines explains, "They said, 'Damn what you think I'm supposed to be—I will be what I ought to be and if I must die to do it, I'll die.' And for a long time they did get killed" (Lowe 115). Such actions are evident in *A Gathering of Old Men* as after falling victim to the cruelty and injustice for five to seven decades of their lives, the old men run risk of either being thrown in jail or shot to death. In the novel, Sheriff Mapes threatens to place one of the old black men in the electric chair because he refuses to retract his confession: "When that juice hit you, I've seen that chair dance. You see, Uncle Billy, we don't have a permanent chair in Bayonne. And we don't waste time screwing it down—not just for one killing" (79). The men are no longer persuaded to remain passive. For decades, black men were denied the freedom to act as

men. Coot, a World War I Veteran, believes he had earned the right to be considered a man after defending his country. But much to his dismay, he was forced by whites to remove his uniform and threatened with violence if ever caught wearing it: “ I used to put on my old uniform and look at myself in the chifforobe glass. I knowed I couldn’t wear it outside, but I could wear it round the house. Today I told myself I was go’n put it on and I was go’n sit out on my garry with my old shotgun, and I was go’n shoot the first person who laughed at me or told me I had to take it off” (114). A flawed social construction of the western man fashioned a crippling definition of black manhood.

Andrea Hunter and James Earle Davis have taken a closer look at how manhood is articulated by African American men. They declare, “to be black and a male in American society places one at risk for a variety of economic and social ills” (464). And although African American men are expected to conform to various dominant gender role expectations such as the head of the household and the breadwinner, they have been deprived of the means to help them obtain such success in mainstream America. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the old black men share in their experiences of being deprived of agricultural opportunity: “After the plantation was dying out, the Marshalls dosed out the land for sharecropping, giving the best land to the Cajuns, and giving us the worst—the bottom land near the swamps” (94). It was this type of treatment that left many African American men deprived of economic and social opportunities.

Gaines has articulated the idea of manhood as both a social role and part of one’s personal identity in many of his literary works. Gaines’ conceptualization of manhood, however, differs from those that may be espoused or even practiced in African American communities. For Gaines, manhood involves taking responsibility: “I think we think that



being a big tough guy, like a football player, or a bully, is being a man. This is the kind of thing that I am saying all the time, that that isn't what makes a man" (Lowe 321). In *A Gathering of Old Men*, there are characters who seek to obtain manhood through the degradation of other men, specifically black men. Mapes, for instance, a local white sheriff who symbolizes the justice system, is in charge of investigating the murder. But as he interrogates each accused person, he employs past methods of physical aggression to intimidate them. Two of the men, Billy Washington and Gable, are forcefully struck twice as a result of Mapes' dissatisfaction with their responses to his questions. Gaines' concept of manhood also consisted of taking responsibility for one's action and being willing to accept the consequences. In Gaines' "Three Men" Proctor Lewis accidentally kills someone after having to defend himself in a fight. Proctor accepts responsibility for his actions by turning himself into the local authority instead of waiting for them to hunt him down and arrest him (121). This sense of manhood is revealed in *A Gathering of Old Men* when Charlie returns to the crime scene to take responsibility for the killing of Beau Boutan. Charlie asserts: "I ain't Big Charlie, nigger boy, no more, I'm a man. Ya'll hear me? A man come back. Not no nigger boy. A nigger boy run and run and run. But a man come back. I'm a man" (187).

Historically, black men have been immobilized by fear and characterized by their inability to defy their aggressors without being tortured or killed. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Mapes applies intimidation tactics to try and pry out of one of the old black men the truth about who really killed Beau: "What were you doing when Candy called you?" "I was right here. And I shot him." Mapes' big face had turned redder with exasperation.

He wanted to hit the old man again, maybe even choke him”(79). Waves of terror suppressed the black man’s views and perspectives in the past. Because of this, the black man’s participation in various social arenas such as education, politics, and even law enforcement was limited. Gaines breaks this silence by allowing the old men’s testimonies to chorus in protest, and ignite a spark of confidence to take action. Without hesitation, the old men boldly lift their voices and gradually tear down the racist views that held them in bondage for decades. Cleverly, Gaines presents a new conception of the black male replacing what was perceived as passivity with aggressiveness. With their twelve-gauge shotguns in hand setting out to stop a possible lynching, the old men assert their human dignity. Ida B. Wells, who believed that this was the way blacks had to refute brutality committed against them, proposed a similar plan of action: “When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs a great risk of biting the dust every time his African American victim does, he will have greater respect for African American life. The more the African American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged, and lynched” (23). For Gaines, however, physical violence was only a fraction of what it would actually take to re-claim personal and communal responsibility in a society where social order was established and controlled by white society.

Gaines allows women to serve as an influential force to help guide black men in the direction of discovering their own masculinity. For some males, it is maternal love that lays the groundwork. For other men it is their consistent teaching and internal strength. Gaines’ demonstrates this in “The Sky is Gray,” where a mother exhibits independence: ‘There’s food in the kitchen,’ she says to Mama, ‘I’ve been keeping it warm.’ Mama turns

right around and starts for the door. 'Just a minute,' the old lady says. Mama stops. 'The boy'll have to work for it. It isn't free.' 'We don't take no handout,' Mama says (113).

On the contrary, Gaines has also shown where women have played a minimal role in the development of boy to man. In "A Long Day in November," the behavior of the dad parallels the behavior of his son. Amy, the wife and mother in the story, has failed to contribute to her husband making responsible decisions and providing her son the direction he needs to one day become a productive member in society. This lack of influence has impeded the black man in *A Gathering of Old Men* to completely transition into manhood. It is not until the men have aged significantly that they seek to achieve their own manhood. Nevertheless, there is opposition by the various women to support and understand the reasons why their men are adamant about taking a stand against white oppression. For example, Matthew Lincoln Brown, who is invigorated by the movement for change, refuses to allow his wife to alter his plans to restore his dignity: "Give a old nigger like me one more chance to do something with his life. He give me that chance, and I'm taking it, I'm going to Marshall. Even if I have to die at Marshall. I know I'm old, maybe even crazy, but I'm going anyhow. And it ain't nothing you can do about it" (38). Although the male role has been directly or indirectly influenced by women, traditionally in most cultures the role of the male has been defined among other males, specifically the father.

According to Gaines, the male role has been the missing link in a number of African American families and has hindered black males' journey to manhood. Gaines, however, attributes this separation to slavery. Gaines says the problems arose when white slave

owners divided families, separating fathers from sons, mothers from daughters, and husbands from wives in order to put slaves on an auction block. Because of this, Gaines believes they have not reached each other again and can't fathom an idea that would bring them back together (Lowe 87). Valerie Babb has observed that "the psyche of Gaines' male characters is a direct result of paternal presence or absence"(98). For instance in "Three\_Men", Proctor Lewis was abandoned by his father but finds a father-figure in a fellow prisoner while he is in jail. James' father in "The Sky is Gray" is drafted by the U.S. army, which leaves the family financially strapped. James is forced to sacrifice his childhood in the absence of his father. In "Bloodline," Copper Laurent, who is biracial, never had a relationship with his deceased white father. Charlie in *A Gathering of Old Men*, on the other hand, develops a father/son relationship with Mathu. Charlie was timid, unlike his godfather or Parrain, Mathu. He always ran scared. He never stood up to either whites or blacks: "That's all I ever done, all my life, was run from people. From black, from white; from nigger, from Cajun, both. All my life made me do what they wanted me to do, and 'bused me if I did it right, and 'bused me if I did it wrong—all my life. And I took it" (188). But at the age of fifty Charlie finally takes responsibility for his actions and earns the right to be considered a man. This was a prayer answered for Mathu, whose manhood was never questioned.

Mathu never backed down to those who considered themselves in authority, and he was respected for this around the community. Mathu tried to teach Charlie how to take responsibility for himself when put into an adverse situation, but his daily lessons always fell on deaf ears until Charlie returned and admitted his guilt. "You tried to make me a man, didn't you, Parrain? Didn't you," (189). A bond of mutual respect was birthed

between Charlie and Mathu. Gaines illustrates how a man can secure his manhood by demanding the same respect that he provides to others. For example, Charlie in the company of other elderly men wants Mapes to address him as “Mr. Biggs.” Prior to 1954 and even after, black Americans were expected to refer to their white counterparts or whites in a position of authority as “Boss.” This replaced “Master”, a title used during slavery. However, during an informal exchange, black males had to address a white person with either Mr. or Mrs. On the contrary, all black men were called by their first name or referred to as “boy”, “uncle”, or “old man” ([www.jimcrowhistory.org](http://www.jimcrowhistory.org)). But Charlie affirms his manhood and the level of maturity he has reached. Mapes argues without hesitation: “Sheriff, I’m a man,” he said to Mapes. ‘And just like I call you Sheriff, I think I ought to have a handle too—like Mister. Mr. Biggs.’ ‘Sure.’” Mapes said (187). Gaines has established a viable brotherhood of responsible black men who has united to undermine the white supremacy that advocates dehumanizing the black race. Now manhood has taken center stage, and according to Gaines it is everyone’s issue and everyone’s fight (Carmean 109). Here Gaines comes full circle with a new definition of manhood for the old black men, a definition that has gradually brought about the unification of all men in *A Gathering of Old Men*.

## Chapter 3

### Mediation of Cultures

*We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.—Martin Luther King*

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines unveils to readers the mediation of racial attitudes. In order to accomplish this task, Gaines applies traditional modes of writing through the use of narrative oral storytelling to reveal the character's reveal relationships with each other. Gaines also supports a new racial order. W. E. B. Dubois, a prominent civil rights activist, set the stage for this concept, which advocated African Americans having the same rights as white citizens: "Work, culture, liberty,—all these we need, not singly, but together, not successively, but together, each growing, and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race" (Dubois 5). Gaines takes a keen interest in dramatizing the interdependence of whites and African Americans in his fiction. Early on in *A Gathering of Old Men*, we are introduced to Candy Marshall. She is white and part owner of the plantation where Beau was murdered. Candy has developed a father/daughter relationship with Mathu, and she is determined to protect him in spite of the opposition within her race. But her desire to protect him is self-motivated. She has failed to see the purpose of the old men's reunion and instead fears losing control over Mathu: "You've been trying to split us up all day," she said. 'And you want to keep them slaves the rest of their lives.' Mapes said back. "Nobody is a slave

here” Candy said. “I’m protecting them like I’ve always protected them. Like my people have always protected them” (174). Gaines displays a mutual understanding between whites and blacks in his fiction and brings forth hope of racial reconciliation in the mist of adversity.

In the novel, Charlie refuses to succumb to any more physical abuse from Beau Boutan and kills him. Although slavery had come to an end, blacks and whites during this time were still positioned on opposite ends of the social totem pole with whites remaining on the top. It was also still common for whites to deliberately inflict pain upon African Americans without prosecution, but if a black man imposed such hateful actions against a white man, the consequences were severe and even deadly at times. But if certain races shared similar interests, there wouldn’t be a need for brutality. Gaines explains this is why he writes, “Many years ago, I was asked what group I wrote for. I said I write for the black youth of the south so that maybe he can find out something about himself... and the white youth of the South because only when he knows something about his neighbor will he know something about himself”(Lowe 252). In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Charlie’s actions represent a racial divide, and his actions adhere to the position that the ends justify the means. This was an attitude that the old men could not adopt. It was likely that Charlie would be reprimanded for his actions, although he felt they were justified. Beau Boutan is the son of Fix Boutan, who terrorized the black community. Frantically, nearby neighbors spread the news and await the arrival of Fix and his lynch mob, but surprisingly Fix changes his mind: ‘The old man ain’t showing up,’ he said. ‘His All-American son talked him out of it,’ Luke Will said. Gaines, nevertheless, was determined

to construct real change.

That change begins to take place over the course of the plot when Gilbert “Salt” Boutan and Calvin “Pepper” Harrison enter the scene. Gilbert Boutan is the younger brother of Beau Boutan and Calvin Harrison is Gilbert’s teammate on a local college football team. Visibly “Salt” is white and “Pepper” is black, but on the football field, Gaines shows us, color has no face. Gilbert and Calvin simultaneously depend upon each other for physical and emotional support: “The first time ever, black and white, in the Deep South. I can’t make it without Cal, Papa. I depend on him. Every time I take that ball... I depend on him, Papa every moment I’m on that field” (138). Collectively, Salt and Pepper form a bond that symbolizes a movement for change, a civil rights movement for equality.

The civil rights movement in the Southern United States reached its highest peak during the years of 1954-1965. During this time African Americans struggled to attain racial equality and full citizenship rights. It became their duty to have the system of segregation abolished. The laws enacted under segregation denied blacks the right to vote and to use the same public accommodations as whites, such as schools, transportation, public restrooms and water fountains. Under this system, blacks continued to be reminded of their inferiority to whites. But civil rights activists both white and black took to the streets, challenging segregation and various other forms of discrimination with protest marches, boycotts, and refusals to abide by segregation laws. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gil objects to his father’s hostility by refusing to participate in a possible execution: “Papa, I won’t go along,” Gil said, shaking his head, ‘You can beat me, but I won’t go along,” (138). Similarly, Rosa Parks exhibited a defiant act against injustice



during the Montgomery Bus Boycott when she refused to give up her seat.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott led by Dr. Martin Luther King was an immediate success; it pressured the federal government to address racial injustices lingering in the South. Sit-ins followed the Montgomery Bus boycott and whites united with blacks in 1961 on what they called “Freedom Rides” to try and stop Jim Crow laws that prevented blacks from traveling on desegregated interstates. The “Freedom Rides” were executed after a 1960 Supreme Court decision ruled that segregation was illegal in bus stations that were connected to interstate travel (<http://www.encyclopedia.com>). But although many risked their lives to abort segregation practices, friction held back the building of harmony among the races as there were whites who believed they should remain in control. Gaines exposes these pockets of racism in his fiction. For example, in “The Sky is Gray” the mom and son are searching for a place to get out of the cold weather but are deterred by establishments which cater to whites only. In “Just Like a Tree” Aunt Fe is about to be moved to the North after a recent bombing was organized to impede the progress of the civil rights movement. This example of white resistance to change is illustrated also in *A Gathering of Old Men* through the actions of Luke Will. Fix and Luke Will represent the old southern regime, and Luke is eager to join Fix to take revenge against the old black men. Gil protests that the world has changed and the views and perspectives of people like Luke Will are gradually fading away: “Luke Will and his gang are a dying breed. They need a cause like this one to pump blood back in their bodies” (143). But in spite of their human rights being rejected, blacks continued to prevail.

During the Civil Rights Movement many others were persuaded to join the fight and end segregation. In 1963 thousands of whites and blacks gathered in Washington to convince Congress to pass the Civil Rights legislation that had been proposed by President John F. Kennedy. During this march on Washington, Dr. Martin Luther King, delivered his “I Have A Dream” speech. It was in this speech that Dr. King envisioned unity among the races. Gaines brings about this sense of unification in *A Gathering of Old Men* when Gil’s two brothers unite with him against their father who wishes to avenge their brother’s death. Jean admits: “I won’t ever forget this day, ever. But Gilly is right. We have laws out there to do what many of these people would like to see us do” (140). Gill, along with his two brothers, indirectly helps to minimize racial injustices. Fix concedes: “I have no other cause to fight for. I’m too old for causes. Let Luke Will fight for causes. This is family” (147). As a result, old racial attitudes were altered. This was evident during the Civil Rights Movement when signs of progress penetrated to the surface in the South.

For instance, in 1964, a year after Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which outlawed racial segregation in schools, public places, and places of employment. This bill was introduced by President John F. Kennedy in June of 1963, but sadly Kennedy didn’t live to see the bill go before the House of Representatives. But in spite of violent attacks on protesters, the bill made it to the House on February 10, 1964. President Johnson, who succeeded President Kennedy, signed the Act into law on July 2, 1964. Blacks were granted their civil rights: however, the struggle for complete freedom continued as depicted in *A Gathering of Old Men* as blacks continued to be subjected to heinous acts like lynching. A friend of Fix Boutan

anxiously awaits his arrival: 'Boy, boy, boy, we haven't had a good stringing in these parts in quite a while.' 'We'll have one now, if you know Fix' (157).

But to demonstrate a cultural shift in *A Gathering of Old Men*, education and sports are the focus for the younger generation as opposed to the older generation who centered their lives around racial antagonism (Leiter 108). Gil no longer sees the world as his father. He has had the benefit of being exposed to a desegregated South as a student at LSU and has shared the racist views of his father. Gil exhibits this as he says to his father, Fix, 'Those days are gone, Papa.' Gil said, 'Those days when you just take the law in your own hands—those days are gone. These are the '70's, soon to be '80s. Not the '20s, the '30s, or the 40's. People died—people we know—died to change those things. Those days are gone forever, I hope' (143). Optimism and the persistence of the old men helped change the minds of those like Gil and his brothers who at one time had difficulty believing African Americans would one day be allotted full human rights.

As civil rights activists and their many supporters stayed on the path to freedom, the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. It barred illegal voting practices that denied blacks the right to vote. But at the same time, opposition intensified. This opposition urged members of the nation to take action in hopes of obtaining equal treatment of every American. Gaines produces this feeling of resistance through the actions of Luke Will and his ruthless followers as they chose to take the law into their own hands and drive to Marshall. Charlie refuses to back down to the old Southern regime, which leads to a shootout involving Charlie and the old men versus Luke Will and his mob. In the end, Luke Will and Charlie are the only two killed in the battle. Luke

Will's death evokes the beginning of an end to racial injustices, and Charlie's death exemplifies a responsibility to gain equality and dignity for all races. Charlie proclaims to Luke Will: "That's all right, you can call me Charlie," Charlie answered from down the quarters. "We all in the dirt now, and it ain't no more Mister and no more Miss"(205). Many people in America strived for equality, although there were countless who lost their lives achieving it. It took bloodshed and tears to rebuild strength within a nation that permitted decades of human suffering.

## Conclusion

On April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King was killed. For many his death symbolized a commitment to peace, equality, and self-worth for all races above hatred ([www.putkingonthe20.com](http://www.putkingonthe20.com)). Still full equality had not been reached, but the reformation of past laws and practices had been established. African Americans were no longer subjugated by Jim Crow laws, and the idea of change became an actuality. Gaines dramatizes this sense of change at the end of the novel, during the courtroom scene as the old men, both black and white, are all put on probation and set free: “The jury deliberated for three hours, then returned with the verdict. After reading it and studying it for a moment, the judge told all defendants to rise, black and white alike. He said since the two men who had killed were both dead, being the same two who had killed Beau and shot Mapes, he could not pass judgment over them” (213). The old men were able to come to terms with their individuality as well as their interdependence. This was central to Gaines’ overall message for the men achieving human equality and true manhood (Leiter 106). Gaines’ avows: “There will always be men struggling to change, and there will always be those who are always controlled by the past. In many cases, those who are controlled by the past can be just as human as those who try to change the past. But to break away from the past, from one philosophy to another, is a burden that one person cannot endure alone”(Lowe 29). Now over forty- years after the Civil Rights movement, and over forty- years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, it appears that blacks have arrived at what Dr. King referred to as the promised land. The “promised land” is where now whites and blacks are free to intermingle in public places without fear of being

involuntarily immersed within racist clutches. It would also appear today that there is a new platform of change geared toward bridging the racial gap. On January 20, 2008, forty years after Dr. King mounted the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to give his “I Have A Dream Speech,” the first African American was sworn in as president of the United States.

President Barack Hussein Obama, son of a father from Kenya, and a white mother from Kansas, symbolizes the American ideology. America is a country consisting of many different races of people from various countries around the world. Miss Jane Pittman, one of Ernest Gaines’ oldest fictionalized representations of the struggle of slavery and what life was like after slavery, posed a familiar question:

“Anytime a child is born, the old people look in his face and ask him if he’s the one. No, they don’t say it out loud like I’m saying it to you now. Maybe they don’t say it at all; maybe they just feel it—but feel it they do. “You the One?” (Gaines 211). Oprah Winfrey boldly answered this question when she endorsed Barack Obama saying, “He is the One.” President Obama’s primary purpose for running for president was to enact a process of change not only in America, but abroad as well. Like the old men in *A Gathering of Old Men* and similar to Dr. Martin Luther King and many others who were inspired to end discrimination and violence against other human beings, President Obama rallied up a multitude of young minds like Salt and Pepper in *A Gathering of Old Men* who were not trapped by the cynicism and rigidity of old ways. Similarly, the old men gathered up those who intended to “equalize and level black and white”(Leiter 115). The setting of the courtroom scene in *A Gathering of Old Men*, portrayed this sense of unity: “The court house was packed everyday, about an equal number of blacks and

whites...”(Gaines 211). President Obama also pushed for Dr. King’s “fierce urgency of now.” It was prevalent during the 1960’s and it is prevalent now. In his words: “There is not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America... an America that fulfills Dr. King’s promise that we be judged not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character “(Obama 231). But although it appears that America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, has conquered another milestone in its history, the fight for equality is far from over.

America has a new black president, but race still matters. Historically the problem of the color line has given preference to whites over blacks. Today many of those same barriers still exist. And just like the old men and Salt and Pepper in *A Gathering of Old Men* sought out to dismantle racism and bring forth change, Americans individually and collectively have to step forward and take responsibility for what ails them as well. Gaines acknowledges a reality of racism that has been seamed in the development of this nation. He asserts, “The thing is there, that wall is there, that law that has been written is there. So that when you say slavery ended one hundred thirty years ago, that wall is still there”(Lowe 258). In the novel, racial disparities are prevalent as the transition from agrarianism to industrialization had a negative effect on the lives of the black workers in the fictionalized town of Bayonne. For example, industrialization replaced the need for various farm workers who had once plowed the land. Johnny Paul reacts, “Thirty, forty of us going out in the field, with cane knives, hoes, plows—name it. Sunup to sundown, had, miserable work, but we managed to get it done”(91). Mechanization served as another tool to oust the blacks within the community away from

their ancestral land.

In the novel racial disparities also centered around the perception of the college campus climate. During this time within the novel, colleges had been integrated on all levels including sports. However, there was still opposition to the mixing of the races. Fix Boutan in *A Gathering of Old Men* desperately tried to hold tight to his racist ideology as he conversed with a friend about how teaming up with another race, would lead to the destruction of the white race: “They say I am—the All American and the butcher. They say my ideas are all past. They say to love family, to defend family honor, is all past. What is left?... No there is only one place left to go now, to the cemetery...”(146). Lastly, race continues to be a major factor not only in today’s society but in the novel as certain racial groups are marred by stereotypes and exclusion from various opportunities that could enrich their economic success.

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the black and white paradigm broadens the racial and ethnic gap. The reader is introduced to two separate oppressed ethnic groups: the Cajuns and the blacks. Consequently, the Cajuns are white but remain socially inferior to other fellow Caucasian men that arrived in America before them. But regardless of their inferior status, they still considered themselves superior to blacks. Candy Marshall, for instance, is a Cajun who owns part of the Marshall plantation where blacks have resided and labored over for years. She appears to have a great rapport with the black laborers; Candy Marshall maintains control over them as she considers the black laborers as part of her property. She asserts, “I won’t let them touch my people” (17). Unlike the blacks, she was able to own land while they were forced to uproot from the only land which they had known all of their lives. This idea of race mattered greatly as the blacks were excluded



from various resources and failed to be recognized as equal to the other races. After examining this novel, we can conclude that Gaines understood the struggle of the human race to unite as one uniformed body of people. Overtly, Gaines offered influential characters in *A Gathering of Old Men* that recognized the social repercussions of slavery which deprived the old men of their manhood and as the old men reclaimed their dignity and self-worth, signs of racial cooperation began to take center stage.

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## VITA

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