

5-20-2011

## The Journey to Manhood in Gaines' Bloodline

Shagun Rawat  
*University of New Orleans*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

---

### Recommended Citation

Rawat, Shagun, "The Journey to Manhood in Gaines' Bloodline" (2011). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1341.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1341>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

The Journey to Manhood in Gaines's Bloodline

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
English

by  
Shagun Rawat  
B.A. University of Mumbai, 1988  
M.A. University of Mumbai, 1991

May, 2011

Copyright 2011, Shagun Rawat

## Acknowledgement

I would like to wholeheartedly thank my professor Dr. Earle Bryant for giving an enriching wealth of introduction on African American literature; in the last two semesters that I spend in his class and for his consistent motivation. I would also like to thank Dr. Doll for his encouraging feedbacks and Dr. Lackey for showing his support. I would especially thank my family, particularly my mother even though she is thousands of miles away; I owe my success to her. I would also like to express my gratitude to my friends Geeta and Hitesh and my aunts, who kept cheering and egging me on every time. All this would not have been possible without the blessings of my Guru, Shri Ravi Shankar whose presence and strength made me what I am today. I would like to thank all the wonderful people who in their thoughts, words and smiles and action encouraged me all through this journey. I have indeed been fortunate to stand tall and come out enriched in this journey.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	v
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1 .....	5
Chapter 2 .....	13
Chapter 3 .....	23
Conclusion .....	37
Bibliography .....	39
Vita .....	41

## Abstract

Ernest Gaines collection of five short stories *Bloodline*, (1968) depicts the effects of racism and its denigrating effects on the lives of the black men .Gaines use of animal imagery furthers the effects of racism on the psychology of the blacks. The resolution comes around in the form of a mentor who helps the protagonists to break through the debilitating mind-set and work towards a new self-identity no longer defined by the white man. Gaines articulates the effects of lack of maturity, responsibility and understanding on the lives of the protagonists, their families and the community as a whole. Gaines brings out the new avatar of the black man who in his self-actualized journey arrives at an understanding of nurturing, caring and contributing to the community. It marks both the culmination and a beginning of true manhood in the lives of his central characters.

Racial denigration, animalistic state, maturity, nurturing, self-identity, manhood

## Introduction

Ernest J. Gaines's collection of five short stories, *Bloodline*, addresses many issues, such as responsibility, racial segregation, familial instability, and the search for identity. But there is a common thread that runs through the collection and binds them into a common whole. It is the journey towards manhood, which is the underlying quest of the protagonists in each of the stories. In an interview, Gaines has said, "You must understand that in this country the black man has been pushed into a 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 96). Even though slavery as a practice does not exist in the stories, the master and slave continue to dictate the major relationships in *Bloodline*. The journey to manhood is Gaines's attempt to bring forth and tackle each of the character's individual tribulations. During their endurance through periods of pain, suffering and loneliness they are able to find a breakthrough as they metamorphose into responsible and caring adults, enabling an understanding of themselves and their place in the community as a whole.

Gaines has said that he writes about "survival with sanity and love and a sense of responsibility, and getting up and trying all over again not only for one's self but mankind" (Lowe 96). This approach is reflected in the stories in *Bloodline*, where the journey toward manhood extends beyond the individual. It is not defined by proving one's masculinity over women; rather, it is a long road to a hard-won sense of self-recognition and self-esteem achieved by waging battle with racism, which consigns the black man to the category of an animal. One consequence of losing this battle is the loss of his sense of identity and his reputation in the community. It is at such a crucial moment that Gaines provides resolution in the guise of a

mentor who inherently understands and knows what must be done to reach manhood. The mentor in Gaines's stories is an intrinsic part of the African- American community, and helps the black man achieve this knowledge in order to free himself from the inhibiting forces at both individualistic and societal levels at large. Explaining this concept of freedom which is at the heart of most African- American writing, Alice Walker comments, "[B]lack writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom. Perhaps this is because our literary tradition is based on the slave narratives, where escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together" (5).

The first chapter in my thesis, "The World of Black and White," focuses on the theme of manhood and on the racial indignities experienced by many of the characters. White society's refusal to grant them self-worth does not debilitate them but instead encourages them to seek dignity beyond the confines of the system by refusing to kow-tow to the white man or engage in abject self-pity. "Masking" is one of the ways of sabotaging the white man's stereotypical expectation of blacks. In "The Sky is Gray" James learns the art from his mother, Octavia, during their trip to the town to see the dentist. In "Three Men" Procter Lewis, a nineteen-year-old black youth, uses "masking" to keep the prejudiced white cop from beating the daylight out of him. Yet another way of confronting racism is by finding and articulating a voice. John F. Callahan brings out the force of the voice in the relationship of the voice with the intent: "Voice is bound up with a storyteller's (and character's) responsiveness. Voice shapes and articulates what Kate Chopin in her American classic [*The Awakening*] called that point in life when a person is 'beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her' " (89,90). For instance, Copper Laurent uses his voice in "Bloodline," the fourth story, to demand his "birthright" from his uncle,



Frank Laurent, who refuses to acknowledge the relationship since Copper is a mulatto. He is the only black character who openly defies the white man's hold, so much so that he not only equates himself in every way with whites but also derogatively begins to emulate their practice of undermining the blacks.

The tumultuous period of the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the '60s marks the radical turn around as shown in the break out of violent clashes between blacks and whites in "Just Like a Tree," the final story in the collection. The black man no longer wants to turn his back and desires and demands the same privileges as the whites. The protagonist Emmanuel is at the forefront of the movement and is totally committed to its ideals as he declares his resolve, "And if they were to bomb my own mother's house tomorrow, I would still go on" (247).

The second chapter, "Dogged Animal Bestiality," explores the derisive comparisons of the black man with animals in order to deny black men their manhood. It is an internalization of the sense of worthlessness as the most frequent reference is likened to that of a dog; other than that it is the inherent rage exhibited in comparisons to a "caged animal," "tush-hog," a "bull," and several others that serve to highlight the antipathy and need for the blacks to redeem themselves in their own eyes. Their treatment and devaluation is best summed up by Olympia Vernon's novel, *A Killing in this Town* quoted by Dana A. Williams:

We are white men, born unto the earth  
And land, which is ours and belongs to us, as  
Free and automatic white men.  
All niggers must be obedient:  
They are not a part of the human thread;  
But are animals and must be dragged from

Their properties and stricken from the  
Blood of the nation.

(112)

The third and final chapter, “The Role of the Mentor in The Culmination of Manhood” touches upon the main theme of manhood and the role of the mentor in getting the protagonist to overcome blockages and achieve selfhood, a resurrection that was otherwise never a possibility in the realm of the general scheme of life. This is the theme that holds together the collection in its entirety and forms the nucleus of the road towards manhood. The last story in *Bloodline*, “Just Like a Tree,” wraps up the wisdom and end of the journey for Aunt Fe the metaphorical image of manhood, but it is the beginning of a quest for the rest of the community. The mentors like Madame Toussaint, Octavia and Munford in the rest of the stories are instrumental in enabling the protagonists to achieve their goals of manhood in the course of the journey. It is a journey marked by love, sacrifice, and the pursuit of one’s dream of achieving true manhood.

## Chapter 1

### The World of Black and White

Gaines's protagonists refuse to remain "seated at the back" figuratively; they carve out a path for themselves without ingratiating their selfhood. In the racially polarized world that Ernest Gaines depicts in his fiction, black folks are assigned a specific place in society on account of their skin color. This means that African Americans have to walk a step behind white folks and continue to maintain the status quo without raising their voice. Their sense of pride and selfhood is explicit later, as in the gradual process of their growth; they refuse to accept the subjugation handed to them by white society and eventually demand equality in the Civil Rights Movement. The African American protagonists in *Bloodline* continue throughout to maintain their dignity and in the process find their voice that empowers them and the community as a whole.

An excerpt from Ishmael Reed's poem "Another Day at the Front" (2003) captures the notion of "otherness" that African- Americans perpetually deal with in *Bloodline*:

I was fined for living while black. Being "universal" is difficult in a country where African Americans are defined by the police, by the red-liners, by the racial and retail profilers, by the rude treatment in everyday life by people who are prejudiced (56).

In "The Sky is Gray," James undergoes his first-hand lesson of dealing with racial polarity after leaving the surety and security of home. The journey to the town, Bayonne, unveils overwhelming disparities as human beings are treated strictly on basis of their skin color. Octavia and James' action of having to "go sit in the back," metaphorically is constantly dealt with in the course of their encounters with the whites on their trip to see the dentist in "The Sky is Gray". Their skin color determines that as blacks they are assigned seats at the back of the bus. The signs "White" and "Colored" spell the distinction very clearly. The two worlds are very

clearly segregated. The differences are readily apparent in the school in Bayonne, which is a “Big old red one” with “white children playing in the yard” (93). Even the flag at the courthouse, James observes, “ain’t like the one at school” (93). This is a marker for James who “leaves a black world whose rules he understands...and enters a white world whose antagonism is indicated by many images, one of which is the Confederate flag replacing the American flag” and by an “institution assumed to symbolize justice for all” (Babb 24). Even an “institution” like the courthouse is shown to have a flag which has come to be called the Dixie flag and is recognized as the symbol of the south. It is largely ironic that a house of justice should come to stand for a disparity that Gaines is indirectly alluding to. James is easily able to deal with issues like covering up his fear of the darkness and taking care of his younger siblings back at home. But in the world beyond the rural setting, James is a mere observer initially, as he is still getting accustomed to the rules and the sights previously unknown to him.

It is the outer markers, like skin color, that dictate the expected behavior of the white people in town. The white nurse turns down James’s mother’s request to be able to see the doctor despite the long trip and patient wait. The nurse’s arbitrary decision is made on the spur of the moment without due consideration of the difficulties encountered by the mother and son. The old lady waiting along with them sums up the whole approach: “they take you when they want to. If you was white, that’s something else; but we the wrong color” (103).

Despite the adverse circumstances James’s mother turns events to their favor as she walks into a white man’s store to ostensibly buy axe handles. The mother and son have been walking for hours in the sleet and rain and have nowhere to go in order to keep themselves warm. There is a tacit and deep understanding between the mother and son as she keeps checking out each of the axe handles only to turn them down. James has been made to stand near the

heater by his mother to warm up from the excruciating cold outside. “The white man just looks at his pile of axe handles” and he is befuddled as he “just scratch his head and follows her” (105). James learns the technique of masking his true feelings, which is essential to preserving his pride and survival, (Babb26). The art of masking is not a compromise in the sense that James has to learn to ingrain the expected ways of the world in order to survive in the toughest conditions without succumbing to defeat or self-pity. It is his mother’s way of further educating him to overthrow the color line discreetly. Octavia is thus successful in subtly subverting the segregated line of color. She chooses the softer option of presenting herself as a prospective customer which ostensibly appears as an innocent commercial trade-off. In the absence of such a make-believe show on her part, she and James would even have been denied an entry into the white man’s shop. Octavia’s stance is a form of an inert and quiet protest and enables her to maintain her dignity.

White generosity is a rarity, but despite the tempting offer of food and warmth by the old lady, there is a hint of overt helpfulness and an obligation towards the poor and black mother and son. So, despite walking continually in the cold weather outside, biding time till they get to see the dentist, Octavia refuses the white lady’s offer of food: “We don’t take no handouts” (113). James is witness to his mother’s strong will and strength of character which continues to stand tall even in the most torturous circumstances. He learns a lesson that a person’s pride and dignity must never be compromised under any circumstances. Despite “the artificial polarities that divide the world along lines of black and white,” James has learned to make difficult choices (Babb 26). His mature conduct and dignity have enabled him to grow in stature and respect as his mother proudly proclaims, “You not a bum...you a man” (117). Octavia has honed the lessons in James that will serve him well in the future on his journey to manhood.

Procter Lewis in “Three Men” has no other recourse except his stoic patience and calm dignity which he uses as weapons to counter the hostilities that the white cops frequently hurl at him. Procter uses the language of the white cops as he belittlingly refers to himself as “just a nigger” in keeping with the white man’s external categorization of him. The cops refuse to acknowledge his presence as he turns himself in after accidentally killing a man in a fight: “They looked at me, but...they went back to talking like I wasn’t even there” (121). Procter’s skin color marks him as inconsequential in the eyes of the cops. Procter has to conduct himself and talk in a language that highlights his subservience as T.J., one of the openly bigoted white cops, orders him, “Look up when I talk to you”; he is reminded to punctuate the end of his sentences with a plethora of “sirs.”

Yet, despite the lack of space and freedom, there are times he exercises his voice in the very act of refusing to give an answer in select moments: “I passed my tongue over my lips and kept quiet” (122). T.J. wastes no time in running down Procter as he reveals his intent behind turning himself in: “You figured if you turned yourself in, Roger Medlow was go’n get you out, now, didn’t you?” (124). T.J., one of the white cops who is openly biased, preempts Procter’s plan behind turning himself in; Procter would easily get himself bailed by the white plantation owner, Roger Medlow. Racial practices of southern Louisiana in the 1940s allowed plantation owners to secure the freedom of jailed black men in exchange for their commitment to perform day labor on the plantation. T.J. further pushes him into a corner as he declares his intent of dealing “with niggers” like Procter: “See, if I was gov’nor, I’d run every damned one of you off in that river out there” (125). Despite the deliberate attempt by T.J. to provoke him, Procter maintains an outer reserve; he does not grant T.J. the pleasure of rushing headlong into a rage but uses his restrictive freedom to his advantage: “I was quiet, looking at him” (125). It is Procter’s

calm exterior coupled with his inner reserve that serves to infuriate T.J. instead: “He wanted to hit me in the mouth...he wanted to beat me” (125). In refusing to react in a way that would further deteriorate the situation, Procter exhibits a reserved dignity and forbearance that enable him later to deal with larger questions of his identity of manhood within the system.

The whites vehemently deny any relation, more so a “familial” connection with the blacks in keeping with the racial polarities (Babb 34). Frank Laurent, the white plantation owner, refuses to acknowledge Copper as his nephew since he is black. In “Bloodline,” he is desperately clinging on to the last vestiges of white control over black folks’ lives. He continues to subjugate the blacks living on his land. He is insistent that all the antiquated rules be followed, like walking into the owner’s house only through the “back door (161). Despite living in the shadows and continuing to adhere to the plantation system, Amelia, who looks after Frank, does not mince words as Frank accuses her of supporting her black nephew, for the lack of having someone else to blame: “I was all right until that nigger... your nephew got here” (175). She immediately points out the truth to Frank with regard to Copper: “Us nephew” (175), she corrects him. She also goes ahead and bares the atrocities and suffering of the other black women: “Look like Mr. Walter got plenty more round here nobody ain’t been sending for” (175). It is an extremely rare act of assertion on the part of Amelia to speak up against Frank, who commands power and authority. It shows that even some among the older generation of blacks who have lived through slavery and are generally restrained in speech still refuse to bend down and have the inherent spunk to speak up against the system.

Felix, seventy years old, the only other person who displays the courage to speak his mind, is explicit in letting Frank know that the blacks on his plantation do not fear him. Frank learns of his lack of power as Felix informs him: “when you lose the power of the rod, of the

gun, they ain't got nothing to fear no more" (201). On being queried whether he would join hands with Copper in case he seized control, Felix frankly puts forward his view: "I don't believe in joining with anybody out of fear...But I don't know if I wouldn't slap a few of them...if they came for me like they went for him" (201). All the while both he and Amelia are aware that Frank, despite not having a liking for his niece, Greta Jean, will leave the plantation to her after his death, just by the virtue of her belonging to his race. Felix sums up the power struggle between Copper and Frank: "If Copper was white, then this plantation would go to him, not to her, But he's the wrong color to go round claiming plantation" (160). The battle continues unresolved, as John F. Callahan draws attention to, "the unique interaction between southern blacks and whites" wherein they "had to use each other to construct definitions of themselves, yet... acquiesce to social convention by denying the existence of such a bond" (Babb 34).

The wisdom and courage of a select few blacks continue to uphold the underlying spirit of the Civil Rights Movement despite the ongoing violence between the two races. It is their vision and belief that prevents the complete breakdown of relations between the two. The Movement refused to accept the sub-human status and denial of freedom accorded to the black man. It was meant to be a struggle for reaffirmation and validation of equality for the blacks on all fronts. The Civil Rights Movement's song of protest "I shall not; /I shall not be moved..." sets the tone of the last story, "Just Like a Tree." A retaliatory bombing has killed a black woman and her two children. Emmanuel, the committed activist of the Movement, has learned lessons of protest from Aunt Fe, the grand matriarch of the story. He is initially driven by anger to kill on hearing stories of his great-grandfather getting lynched. He realizes the futility of causing pain and suffering as an outbreak of anger that would not provide any lasting solution. It is a sign of deep maturity and true manhood that brings about the understanding. Aunt Fe's loving wisdom



and all sustaining sagaciousness prevail as he admits, “But it was you who told me to get killing out of my mind. I would only bring harm to myself and sadness to the others if I killed” (246).

His commitment and transformation are reflected in his outlook: “I’m not going to stop what I’ve started... We cannot raise our arms. Because it would mean death for ourselves, as well as for the others. But we will do something else- and that’s what we will do. And if they were to bomb my own mother’s house tomorrow, I would still go on” (247).

The white plantation owners continue to remain blind to the needs and aspirations of the black community in general. The complexity of black and white relations is evident in Anne Marie Duval’s perception of blacks, given her background as a white woman from the plantation. She is unaware of the deep-rooted concerns and the cultural, economic and social struggle behind the Civil Rights Movement, as reflected in her queries: “What is the answer? What will happen? What do they want? Do they know what they want? Do they really know what they want? (241). She also has a set way of perceiving blacks; she refers to them as “niggers” who “can laugh and joke even if they see somebody beaten to death” (242). Yet as she comes face to face with Aunt Fe and gifts her the seventy-nine cent scarf, Aunt Fe displays the gift to everyone affectionately: “[Y]’all look. Ain’t it the prettiest little scarf y’ all ever did see? Y’ all look. . . . I go’n put it on right now.” Their fondness for each other endures despite the racial barriers between them (243). Aunt Fe has been just like a tree, firm, unbending in her principles and the reservoir of love, affection and inspiration to all those who seek her guidance. She has stood tall in the face of all kinds of racist oppression and given freely of her knowledge and compassion to everyone from all ages, sexes, class and race. She is the metaphorical representation of manhood in her insurmountable strength as she even wills her own death and departs while she sings the “termination song” (249). She has been the major voice affecting changes in the social, political

order as well as stirring a wave at the deepest core of the humanistic level. She has set in motion the collective themes of self -respect, validation, dignity, and pride, and in her death will her voice and presence resonate for generations to come. These are the lessons that the black man has to learn in order to achieve manhood in its true sense of the term.

“Just Like A Tree” marks the befitting conclusion and an onward journey of Gaines’ vision of hope, strength and character underlying the framework of his timeless pieces of work and the spirit of characters who continue to endure for ages to come. It is a pursuit of a dream that has set in motion endless journeys and still continues to this day and time.

## Chapter 2

### Dogged Animal Bestiality

Gaines employs animal imagery in *Bloodline* to bring out the angst, the helplessness and the inherent rage in connection with the protagonists' state of mind and the circumstances that force them to react in ways that heighten the animal-like comparison. It also functions as a catalyst in enabling the protagonist to come face to face with his fears and doubts and in finding a solution for his fragmented state of existence. Other than that, it also points to the devaluation of his black identity by the white society at large. It is to the credit of the principal characters who refuse to let the depravity of a situation or the white man's denigration of his self-hood get in the way of the achievement of his true identity. Alice Walker points out the inherent richness of Gaines's black characters: "They are people, fully realized in Gaines's fiction...never completely wiped out by the white...His heroes would fight to walk uprightly through a hurricane" (Bloom 32).

In the first story, "A Long Day in November," there is a surfeit of dog imagery that points out the element of self-pity and worthlessness with reference to Eddie Howard, the estranged husband who has yet to learn the lessons of responsibility. He presents his case to Rev. Simmons in order to get the pastor to bring his wife home: "I go to work in the field. Work like a dog... When I come home for dinner ---- hungry's a dog-my wife, neither my boy is there..." (40, 41). Yet again as he pleads with Amy, his wife, to return home he implores as best as possible: "Honey, please... Say you missed me. I been grieving all day like a dog" (65). Eddie had earlier continued to ignore his responsibilities as a family man, preferring to spend his time instead with his car. When all his entreaties fail to get his wife back home he seeks the help of Madame Toussaint, a conjurer woman. She warns him of the danger of losing his wife to another

man if he did not act upon her advice, to burn the car, immediately. In course of the journey, Eddie comes to realize the pain and neglect he has caused his family and particularly his wife. Eddie has learned his lessons and realized the need for fulfilling his role of a family man and agreed to burn his car to root out all the differences between him and his wife. Yet his wife makes a bizarre request by demanding that he beat her to prevent people from laughing at him and he grudgingly complies with it. The decisive factor that signals his complete transformation is that he prefers to be laughed at rather than to subject Amy to a beating but agrees to it only to please his wife. It is while Eddie is complying with her request, though unwillingly, that Sonny stands to defend his mother against his father: "Leave my mama alone, you old yellow dog" (74). It is perhaps an internalization of his grandmother's former perception of his father, Eddie as an inconsequential and irresponsible man, which brings forth Sonny's outburst. However, Eddie has already undergone a transformation by this point in time, so ironically the image of the dog does not apply to Eddie's present altered status. It is the final decisive moment that is followed by the burning of his car, the symbol of rugged American masculinity that transforms Eddie from a self-centered, insensitive male and establishes him as a caring, thoughtful and responsible individual. It is the turning point of the story. His decision and action have won for him his peace with his family along with admiration and praise from his wife, mother-in-law, and the entire community. It has instilled values that enable recognition of true manhood for Sonny to emulate.

In the third story, "Three Men," Gaines employs animal imagery for a different reason: to underscore what Babb terms "the tragedy of dehumanization" (28). Gaines hones in on Procter Lewis, who is driven by sheer sexual passion to possess someone else's girl. The other black youth, Bayou, is driven to guard his "territory" as the two of them, "twisted and sweaty," get into a fight to the finish (131). Procter's adversary is akin to a "mule" as he refuses all semblance of

reason to stop the fight. Bayou uses a knife to slash and Procter retaliates with a broken bottle as Bayou finally collapses. The brawl captures an animalistic rage in which each is intent on annihilating the other; each sees the other as not a similar human being but merely as an antagonist who needs to be eliminated at all costs.

Procter is witness to a similar devaluation when he comes upon a conversational tiff between two inmates. Hattie, a transvestite, calls the other inmate, Munford Bazille, a “jungle beast,” who retorts and calls him a “bitch” (128). It is the sheer act of denigrating another black person that eventually begins to assume sexual overtones. The exchange is still marked by castigating the other on a physical level of defacement. Munford is without self-esteem and it is reflected in the lack of respect that he shows in either treating Hattie or another black man outside the jail: “Next Saturday I’m go’n hit another nigger in the head” (139). He does not have the will or the desire to bring a change in his life; he is wedded to his self –denigrating status. Munford, a veteran at being lodged in and out of the jail for the past forty years, later goes on to preach to Procter about the dangers of getting enmeshed in the entrails of mindless rage. He likens himself to a non-human. It was a vicious circle where he “kept on getting into trouble, and they kept on getting me off” (137). He further explains his current animalistic state where the white cops feel the need to keep bringing him to the jail to feel a sense of superiority and security about their own general way of life: “They need me to prove they human... They need us. Because without us, they don’t know what they is” (137). Munford’s brazen honesty about his depraved status is seconded by Hattie, who says: “You’re just an animal out the black jungle,” as Munford predicts that he will hit a fellow black as soon as he is released (139). According to Babb, Procter “figuratively equates blacks with brutes and thereby accentuates the tragedy of dehumanization” (28). Each one is intent on vilifying the other by likening him to an animal

which is the antithesis of manhood. The state of manhood is a far cry here, since apart from lack of respect for the self and others there is no underlying desire to want to get out of the rut and make a fresh start based on the finer values of nurturing, sacrifice, and responsibility.

Yet Munford's rant contains grains of truth as he exudes wisdom about the treatment of blacks: "a nigger ain't worth a good gray mule. Don't mention a white mule: fifty niggers ain't worth a good white mule" (141). Gradually Procter realizes the futility of anyone getting him out of jail. He likens his frustrated condition to that of "a caged animal," and as he reminisces about his misconduct with women, he feels a sense of remorse since he had been treating them "like a dog, anyhow" (144). Yet Munford's process of "educating" Procter "is to explain to him that the diminution of black manhood they now confront is part of a complex beginning at birth... the beast allusion accentuates the essential dehumanization at the core of black devaluation" (Babb 29). Procter's mind then races on to the way Jack's spirit was snuffed out by "a fifteen-cents Cajun" who then along with the rest "broke him the way you break a wild horse" (147). Jack was a hero in their eyes, and the Cajuns wanted to keep the blacks cowed down: "They knowed we loved him, that's why they did him that" (147). Procter is gradually becoming aware of the system perpetuated by the whites as a way of keeping the black man subjugated and the need for the blacks to awake to that reality. Babb reveals the key to Procter's growth: "The use of animal metaphors further underscores Procter's transformation from what is essentially an unthinking brute with no concern for the value of human life to a rational man who deems human life as worthy" (29).

This change soon becomes clearer when Hattie compares the white policemen to "animals... A bunch of pigs-dogs-philistines," as a young boy of fifteen is brought in; he has been mercilessly beaten for stealing cakes to quell his hunger (150). As Procter lectures him

about stealing, Hattie butts in the boy's defense and is called a "whore." He in turn accuses Procter of being "a merciless killer" (151). The latent fury that had caused him to hit out at Bayou surfaces as frenzy overtakes Procter and he moves towards Hattie but quickly changes his mind. Procter is already on the road to a conscious understanding as he is now able to check himself, unlike earlier. The young boy's getting beaten up and thrown in the jail suddenly silences everyone in the cells so much so that Procter finds everyone "Like a bunch of roaches... a bunch of mices...[that] had crawled in they holes and pulled the cover over they head" (151). The system is unforgiving in its refusal to allow the blacks to stand up for themselves. Any one of them who dares to strike out for himself is inhumanly crushed to deter the rest. It brings to fore an animalistic tendency of the basest order which is used to keep other humans down by constantly using threat, terror and the fear of death. This incident triggers the turning point for Procter who decides to put an end to the animal-like treatment of blacks by refusing to turn to Roger Medlow and readying himself for the back-breaking beatings by T.J. and his brood. Babb lays out the key to Procter's growth: "The use of animal metaphors further underscores Procter's transformation from what is essentially an unthinking brute with no concern for the value of human life to a rational man who deems human life as worthy" (29). Procter, in his new avatar of taking charge of his life instead of continuing to expend it aimlessly, has turned around his life in a direction which brings forth a new meaning and purpose in refusing to be animalized by white society. He achieves the definition of manhood in his chalking out a destiny that provides no certainty, yet it is also an affirmation of self-belief along with the possibility of making it through the unforgiving system despite the faint chances. The mere decision has enabled Procter to confront and outgrow his past insecurities and fears and to be able to stand tall despite the absence of definite answers in the immediate future.

“Bloodline,” the book’s titular story, traces Copper’s psychological fragmentation. Copper is the polar opposite of true manhood, since he is propelled by his doubts and fears into denigrating the other black men. His actions and treatment of those of his own race, as he physically batters them, bring out the gross animal-like side of Copper. His desire to “cross over” has placed him in a perpetual state of drift where the answers do not seem to come easily. The story also brings to the fore the battle of the wills and final confrontation between the two Laurents. Frank, though, will never admit to the fact that he and Copper are uncle and nephew. The issue at heart is that of color, since Copper, who is biracial, is “the wrong color to go round claiming plantations” (160) and Frank is insistent that Copper walk in through the back door. Copper is a “solitary figure groping for self-definition” who “seeks validation of his identity” (Babb 32). In the confrontation between the two, Frank Laurent has initially sent two men, Joby and Little Boy, to capture Copper to make him come through the back door. Felix, a seventy-year-old black man on the plantation, is reminded of “a bull” who would possibly have given the two men a run for their lives since Copper single handedly overpowers them. One of the men, Samson, describes Copper as being “possessed to fight like that” (178). Frank has to momentarily accept defeat and at the same time Felix has to contend with Frank’s accusing stare: “Like a man who beat his mule because his wife beat him...” (179). Frank here uses Felix as a scapegoat to vent his anger; Felix is being compared to a mule, the beast of burden and denied manhood, even though he is seventy. The complexity that underlies the battle here is “not only of black against white but of blood against blood” (Babb 35). Frank is not the one to admit defeat easily, and he calls for six men to round up Copper. J.W., the leader of the men sent by Frank, refers to Copper as “that tush-hog” in order to bolster himself and the others on the mission to get Copper. Similarly it shows Copper’s true animal trait as he has physically abused the black



men sent to get him, while on the other hand he himself has been a victim to it as a boy. Soon enough, J.W. and the others meet with the same fate as the previous batch of men. J.W. is beyond himself as he describes Copper: “that boy crazy. No concern for human beings at all. They don’t mean no more to him than a dog or a snake” (195). Copper is able to consistently devalue Frank as he has upstaged all his attempts to capture him and succeeded in demeaning him in the process. Copper’s is the only attempt by a black man in *Bloodline* that has succeeded in dislodging a white man’s authority. Yet his feat is not heroic since he has degraded and disowned the men of his own race. In denying them an identity, his identity continues to be lost despite his proclamations of identifying with the white man. The white man, for his part, refuses to recognize him and accord him a status. Copper’s fears have only resulted in turning him away from reality and his own people.

Copper, in his crazed endeavor, has internalized the white man’s depreciation of blacks in order to claim his “birthright” among the whites. Yet he ironically cross-questions Frank’s stance of addressing the blacks as “men”: “Since when have you started calling them men, Uncle?” (208). In the same breath Copper justifies his stance as he answers his Uncle’s accusation of almost killing the men: “When they act like men, I’ll treat them like men...When they let you make them act like animals, then I’ll treat them like animals” (208). Gaines shows Copper treating his own fellow blacks as sub-humans akin to Frank’s denial of humanistic identity to them. The multitude of animal images associated with Copper illustrates his own denial of human status to himself, since he sees through people, “looking past” them, “his eyes hard as marble” (167). He carries the wound of being born out of rape, a bastard, denied and rejected by his stepfather and the rest of the family after his mother’s death. His life as a youth has been one of “suffering more than anything else” (213). His time spend in jail was an endless experience

with “weeping” where he was made to “scrub the blood off the floor” and “clean the chair” where men were tortured (213). Copper takes refuge in effulging out the demons of “horror” and “powerful cries-little whimpers, like mice in a trap” by internalizing the very mannerisms of the “Rapists, Murderers, plunderers” in a derogative stance against his own people (213,214). He now identifies himself completely with the Laurents, and uses the white man’s stance to dehumanize the black folks employed by Frank. In the process Copper has lost sight of the all-sustaining qualities that contribute to the making of manhood, qualities like readiness to accept change, which contributes to growth and stature of the individual and helps in nurturing the community.

In addition to the continual denial of identity by the whites, there is an added degradation of the blacks among their own people. This disparity within the blacks is a short-sightedness which comes from lack of belief in the self that in turn makes one lose sight of the regenerative power of the community. In the process the two concomitantly keep strengthening and nurturing each other. As seen in the last story, “Just Like a Tree,” James, a city slicker among the many narrative voices is the only one from the North among the rest of the Southerners. He has a sense of superior attitude towards the Southerners as evident from his reference to the men as “Country cats” and the women as “chicks.” He makes general sarcastic comments about the mannerisms and the ways of the Southerners: “This stud takes a swig of his eggnog and... this real down-home way of saying ‘Ahhh’.” James has complete irreverence to the ways of the south as he continues, “...this little chick...she’s crying...just because this ninety-nine year old chick’s packing and leaving” (232). James dehumanizes the rustic Southern men and women; he virtually rips them of their humanity as he derides their over-all approach to life. Just the fact of being a city-slicker and exhibiting mere outward sophistication seem to represent for James the

only desirable quality worth emulating and a way for the blacks to be able to rise up from their humble origins. His narrow vision fails to take into account the rich and sustaining wealth of human ties shared by these rural Southerners that is beyond all categorization. The true identification of manhood enables the protagonists to come face to face with their fears and to confront it squarely. This sense of honesty and readiness to change brings about a growth and a vision which helps them to stand tall in the face of adversities. They are now no longer looking for validation from the white man; but instead draw their sense of worth from themselves and the enriching values of the black community which continues to sustain them.

The majority of Gaines's principal characters in *Bloodline* who have labored agonizingly through long periods of doubt and diffidence and succeeded in creating a self-definition achieve a sense of pride for their individual manhood and consequently set an example for the rest of the community. The association of animal imagery with the protagonists in the initial stages of the stories pointed to the lack of growth, maturity and responsibility in them. In the process of their journey they experience an understanding of the need to contribute to the sustenance of their families and the community as a whole. They have gradually evolved into men who look at self-worth and validation from the perspective of creating a change that enables nurturing of the community as a whole. They are no longer defined by the denial of manhood as dictated by white society. Copper Laurent's vision is fractured since he has chosen to extricate himself from the nourishing aspects of the black community. Perhaps one can hope that he would later turn around and redeem his slanted view. In the absence of such a development one can only foresee Copper getting more bigoted and on the road to self-destruction ways or landing in an asylum. He is forsaken by both blacks and also by the whites with whom he chooses to identify. James, on the other hand is not so severely handicapped. He associates self-worth with class and the city

glitz. One can hope to see a turnaround till the time he realizes the worth and need of associating an enduring relation between the individual and his deep roots in the community. Carl Senna sums up the complex black man's gradual journey towards manhood: "There are seasons in human affairs, of inward and outward revolution, when new depths seem to be broken up in the soul, when new wants are unfolded in multitudes, and a new and undefined good is thirsted for" (21).

## Chapter 3

### The Role of the Mentor in the Culmination of the Journey to Manhood

In *Bloodline*, Gaines's protagonists have one thing in common, which is a vital element of their quest: the gradual evolution of their apparent wayward and ordinary existence into a dignified and caring life. This evolution is largely the result of having a mentor who is able to chalk out the possibility of a transformation, provided the protégé is willing and realizes the need to undergo the sacrifice "capable of effecting change" ( Clark 69). The mentors in each of the stories are tough, no-nonsense, demanding individuals; it is their guidance and dogged insistence which ensure the fruitful journey of hard-won respect from all those who matter: More so it is about the realization of self-worth. David C. Este quoted by Keith Clark, points out that "Gaines's predominant theme...is the search for black manhood...but he does not digest and regurgitate definitions of masculinity" (Quoted in Clarke 67, 68). Rather, Gaines brings into focus the journey towards manhood, where the element of dignity stands tall in the face of challenges and where the black man achieves a self-identity consistently denied to him earlier by white society.

. In "A Long Day In November" Eddie Howard, a black laborer with a wife, Amy, and a son nicknamed Sonny, has to learn the lesson that true manhood involves sacrifice and love. Mere proclamations of love are empty in the absence of genuine actions that speak volumes and profess a man's true character. Eddie has misconstrued lessons of life: he has been spending far too much time out of the house in his car. Amy has put up with Eddie's lackadaisical attitude, but now it is beyond endurance as Eddie shows no responsibility towards his family. His wife has finally decided to call it a day: "Get love from what you give love. You love your car. Go let it

love you back” (13). It is not until Eddie’s wife has left home to go and stay at her mother’s along with their son that Eddie goes wild with insecurity. It is a journey, a discovery, and a practice involving genuine care, letting go of one’s ego, being open to criticism, admitting one’s flaws, and working towards a resolution that finally wins over one’s loved ones and ensures lasting happiness.

Eddie is prompted by Madame Toussaint to learn the dynamics of making a relationship work, which is based on giving rather than being solely centered on perpetual receiving and the satisfaction of one’s own desires. Eddie is on a mission now to get his wife to come home, but he still sees himself as the aggrieved party. The initial mentor that Eddie turns to is the Rev. Simmons, who is unable to crack the impasse between him and his wife. The second mentor that Eddie seeks out is “that old hoo-doo woman” since the preacher “can’t do a doggonething” (44). Madame Toussaint is the community’s grand old visionary matriarch, who is well versed with all the deep-seated workings of the human mind, even more so the minds of the men folk. The minute Eddie enters her house she already is aware of the cause of his trouble: “Your wife left you” (46). Even as Eddie is taken aback by her ability to presage, she disarmingly reveals her knack of knowing: “That’s all you men come back here for” (46). According to Robert M. Luscher, Madame Toussaint’s role is “to steer the protagonist to a clearer conception of his role in the black rural community” (Quoted in Estes 80). It is Toussaint who enables Eddie’s preparedness to change after he realizes the futility of pursuing his selfish desires. It takes Eddie a while to comprehend that it is his lack of responsibility that was the cause of unhappiness for his family. His readiness to work out a solution enables him to win his family’s trust along with the admiration of the community at large. He sets an example for his son to follow in the future that would in turn help him to realize the hallmark of manhood. Humorously, Toussaint

proceeds to dole out advice worth seventy-five cents, but not before warning Eddie, “Don’t complain to me if you not satisfied” (48). And finally she belts out the words that, however, do not make sense to Eddie: “Give it up” (49). Eddie is completely baffled by Toussaint and his innate ego refuses to see himself in the wrong. The sum of three dollars enables Toussaint to give forth the turn-around words, “Go set fire to your car,” prompting Eddie to call it “foolishness” (59). “She teaches Eddie that an automobile does not make a man; maintaining familial stability does” (Babb 21). Madame Toussaint demands unmitigated compliance irresolutely and plays the trickster until Eddie is left with no choice but to accept her advice.

Eddie’s relinquishment of his comfort zone and needs testifies to his complete transformation. He has delved into the real and pressing needs of his family which has now taken his entire focus and has become the nucleus of consolidated action to win them back. Eddie gradually comes to see the turnaround as he informs Toussaint of his wife being with her mother. Toussaint informs Eddie while pronouncing the ultimate truth: “Women like to be in their own house” (61). Her words are terse and pithy as the wisdom continues to flow inexorably: “You men done messed up the outside world so bad that they lost and out of place in it. Her house is her world... Y’all never know how a woman feels, because you never ask how she feels” (61). The sage words solve the whole estrangement as he asks Amy, “if I burn the car like Madame Toussaint say, you’ll come back home?” Amy replies, “If you burn it up, yes, I’ll come back” (65). Eddie’s decision even earns him the compliment from his mother-in-law: “He’s a man after all” (71). ). The change would not have taken place in Eddie in the short span of time had it not been for Madame Toussaint’s continual insistence and stern stance. Eddie had so far failed to recognize the repercussions of his actions as anything serious. The moment he sees himself genuinely in the role as the man of the house he undergoes a transition in his outlook and

undertakes to win his family by giving up his favorite past time that was the cause of all the trouble. He matures into a man who is responsible and proves that he is a genuinely caring and loving husband and father ready to go to any lengths to ensure his family's happiness and comfort because he has found a mentor.

In the next story, "The Sky Is Gray," James, the eight-year-old protagonist, learns further lessons on being tough and resilient in the face of adversities, from his mother, a no-nonsense, practical woman who does not believe in mollycoddling her kids. She inculcates in James to care for his younger siblings and continue to set an example for them by following the highest possible standards at all times. The toughness is not simply an act of bravado; it is an outstanding quality that sets James apart considering his age. The general teaching Octavia has ingrained in James has to do with braving circumstances stoically. James is brought up to hold his emotions in check and he has garnered the art well for a boy of his age: "I'm scared of the dark, too, but I make 'tend I ain't...' 'cause I'm the oldest" (84). He has spent sleepless nights because of his toothache: "I didn't want act like a crybaby... I know we didn't have enough money to go have it pulled" (84). He bears the pain as an act of love and concern to avoid adding to his mother's present hardships. He does exceedingly well at pretending to put together a picture of holding things together on the surface and at being an exemplary older brother for his younger siblings. Since the time James's father has left to join the army, Octavia has been the one to instill the right values in her children. Octavia's loneliness makes her doubly concerned as she drives James harder to overcome any fear or inhibition she perceives as weakness.

Despite James' ingrained restraint, he is sensitive to the red birds he has as his playmates. Despite James proffered inability, "I can't kill him, Mama, Please," Octavia will have none of his weakness (89). She gives him the fork and commands, "Take it," and noticing his



reluctance, “She slapped him again” (89). All the tutoring in the art of bird- kill goes to waste as James is unable to get the other bird. Octavia is infuriated, and James describes her reaction: “she hit me and hit me and hit me” (90). “Octavia is ...concerned that James learn the most important lesson of his environment, that one does what one must to survive” ( Babb 25). There is no change of love he feels towards his mother; on the contrary, there is a further understanding: “Suppose she had to go away like Daddy went away? Then who was go’n look after us?” (90). Anne Simpson cites essayist Frank Shelton who insists that “James feels both love and fear for her, but cannot really express either- it would be unmanly. She is in danger of causing James to lose his sensitivity, while at the same time expecting him to be a ‘man’ ”(208). James seems to understand the intent behind his mother’s toughness on him; it is another lesson of life teaching him about being in a state of readiness and holding his emotions in check. James’s liking for the birds is a finely sensitive aspect of his personality. It would have been unnatural if he hadn’t exhibited any reluctance to kill them. His sensitivity may be a sore point for Octavia at that point in time, but it is this sense of empathy that stands to show that James has indeed assimilated the nuances that go in the making of true manhood.

James even gets to learn a lesson on standing up for himself from his mother when faced by a threat. Even as Octavia consents to dance with the little man in the café meant for blacks, she draws out her knife in self-defense as she realizes his ulterior motive of wanting to pimp her. She springs to her defense and spurts the words, “I’ll gut you from your neighbo to your throat. Come on” (111). Later as Octavia grabs the little man and, pushing him, draws her knife, James wants to “go up to the little man to hit him” but his mother holds him beside her. It teaches James to respect the space that belongs to her and graciously follow her directions without asking any questions at such crucial moments. James comes across as an exemplary son who is

self-effacing to the point of denying even the natural discomfort caused by the cold and the hunger in order to save his mother the pain and constant worry of getting money for their basic needs. The milk and “three little old cakes” are put out for James who “knows” he “can eat a hundred times three” yet he wants his mother to have one so he pretends, “I can’t eat all this” (110). McDonald affirms that “Learning to sacrifice, James denies being hungry so that his Mama will eat some” (112). James has acquired the requisite grit and adaptability it takes in order to qualify him as a man in the true sense of the word.

Lessons in dignity and self-respect are entwined in the encounter with the old white lady who ushers them in to her house from the cold and makes an enquiry, “Y’all done eat?” (113). But on being offered food Octavia retorts, “We don’t take no handout” The old lady strikes a bargain to have her garbage moved for her but not “Unless you eat...I have my pride, too, you know” (113). James has learned that even in the face of demanding circumstances one must always uphold one’s dignity, pride and reserve. Later as she goes on to wrap the salt meat worth more than the quarter, Octavia insists on getting it weighed and refuses to take the meat till the old lady relents and cuts off the extra portion. Octavia will not let the old lady patronize them despite their difficult situation. She insists on accepting a fair portion in accordance with the amount being paid and she denies any kind of charity that would make them feel inferior. The old lady’s innate goodness is surmised in simple dignity by Octavia: “Your kindness will never be forgotten” (117). Almost immediately she calls out to James and makes him turn his collar down: “You not a bum, You a man” (117). Octavia is pleased with her role of mentoring James, who has absorbed all the lessons very well. More importantly, James also learns “his journey to manhood and self-worth has culminated” (Babb 27).

In the third story, "Three Men," Procter Lewis, a nineteen-year-old, has mistaken ideas of manhood which he has to unlearn in the face of stark reality previously unknown to him. He begins the leg of his journey when he turns himself in for killing another black youth expecting an easy bailout as in the past. The act is hardly consequential since the life he has taken is "just a nigger" that does not hold much worth in a white society (121). The turning point for Procter begins the instant he is lodged in the jail along with Munford, a veteran who has been going in and out of jail for "forty, fifty years" (137). Munford brings out the worthlessness of black life by equating it with a base animal: "[A] nigger ain't worth a good gray mule" (141). Procter has internalized the white society's displacement of his identity, which is a "depreciation of his blackness... and all his actions are governed by this acceptance" (Babb 29). He has to imbibe and assimilate the lessons of self-esteem, and Munford, who ironically never practiced it himself, nevertheless proceeds to educate Procter about his own degradation that began around the time of Procter's age and entwined with the similar action of killing another youth. It was the start of a road to habitual violence since it took on a regular pattern: his father got him out every time with a white man's help (read favor). It continued until Procter's present age when Munford finally realized, "they kept getting me off because they needed a Munford Bazille. They need me to prove they human-just like they need that [toilet] over there" (137). Munford's outburst brings out the status of blacks as sub-humans in the eyes of the whites. In keeping blacks subjugated, they felt a sense of false superiority that they were indeed privileged and had the right over the lives of those who would never be on the same par with them and were only born to serve them. The practice ingrained a gradual process of denudation of self-belief until there was none left in the end. Munford cautions Procter as he corrects his stance of dismissing the other black guy: "You killed another old nigger, A nigger ain't nobody" (136). Munford's statement only brings

out the ironical element to the deplorable status of the blacks, since in the white man's world the death or the killing of a black man did not hold much significance.

The acknowledgement of self-worth and the consequent realization of the worthiness of black life is the spark of a new thought that sets Procter to seek a meaning independent from the image doled out by the white man. Munford further bares the stark reality to Procter as he proceeds to dismiss the false notion of manhood among blacks: "Cause face don't make a man-black or white...fucking don't make him and fighting don't make him-neither killing. None of this prove you a man. 'Cause animals can fuck, can kill, can fight-you know that?" (138). The tough conclusion that Munford brings before Procter is the one he had been banking on as a crutch, an easy way of letting him out of the jail; Munford spells out the danger of getting trapped in an apparently harmless web: "Don't let Medlow get you out of here so you can kill again" (138). At the same time Munford dispels all heroic notions of self-actualization by pointing out the lurking danger of refusing to kow-tow to Roger Medlow and the white system: "you don't go to the pen for the nigger you killed...you go for yourself...You go saying, 'Go fuck yourself, Roger Medlow, I want to be a man' (141). But even the act of taking on the challenge does not put an end to the travails ahead as Procter brings forth the real turning point of the decision: "And a month after you been in the pen, Medlow tell them to kill you for being a smart aleck. How much of a man you is then? At least you been a man a month- where if you let him get you out you won't be a man a second" (141). Munford's role of foster father comes to fruition as Procter reveals his intent of wanting to finally break away from the life dictated by the anarchic system for the blacks and opting to face the dangers of the pen as he declares: "I'll take that chance" (141).

Procter's new-found decision also enables him to get in touch with his sensitivity as he "cried and cried and cried" after resolving to go to the pen (151). His current state is far removed from his earlier image of using people to make his ends meet: "I was treating her [Marie] like a dog...I'd do the same thing tomorrow if I was out of here...Hell, let me stop whining; I ain't no goddamn animal...I'm a man" (144). Procter's resolve is put to the test at the sight of a fifteen-year-old boy who is mercilessly beaten and thrown in the jail. Procter takes charge and plays the surrogate father figure role to him. Incidentally, this new side of Procter is partly the result of Hattie, the transvestite, who has triggered the act of caring while Procter was lodged in the jail along with Munford. While Munford takes a dig and treats Hattie like a whore and Procter likens him to a freak, subconsciously Procter has absorbed some finer aspects of caring from Hattie. He takes care of the boy's bruises and washes them at the same time warning him, "I better not catch you in here again" (154). It is a complete reversal of the earlier image of Procter who had scant respect and worth for others' feelings and needs. He now takes upon himself the responsibility of nurturing someone who like him has no one else to depend on in the world. There is the fear of the unknown and nagging doubt about his capacity to withstand the onslaught of the cruel system, but despite it all, he musters the strength to give it a shot as he instructs the boy: "I don't believe in God, He can hear you. That's the only way I'll be able to take those beatings- with you praying" (153). The price of freedom that comes easily and on someone else's terms is the route to a former "slave experience" and Procter consciously prefers a freedom on his own terms by refusing to take the easy way out and that goes to define the true grit underlying manhood ( Babb 29).

In the next story, "Bloodline," Copper is the only protagonist not in need of a mentor to inculcate a sense of pride or dignity in his identity. This is the only story in the collection which

stands out from the rest when it comes to the need and role of a mentor in the life of the protagonist. The denial of the need of a mentor eventually denies Copper the manhood he has wanted to establish all along. Gaines has consistently shown through the other stories in *Bloodline* that a mentor plays a vital role not only in the life of the central characters but also in bringing a positive change in the community as a whole. Since Copper is not dependent on a mentor to gain a sense of validity, he shows a splintered side to his personality that becomes evident in his treatment of other blacks on the plantation. He is derisive and deprecatory to the very people with whom he shares his racial origin. But he is not granted any equality, given his mulatto status, and his condescending view of the black plantation workers compares with that of Frank Laurent, the white plantation owner who is on the verge of dying. Frank's insistence that Copper walk in through the back door like the rest of the blacks meets with stiff resistance and sets the beginning of the ego tussle between him and Copper. Copper, the self-styled "General," insists on being treated as a white man's equal; he even claims the plantation as his "birthright" after Frank's passing (205). He addresses Frank as "uncle" given the fact that he has been born out of Walter Laurent, Frank's dead elder brother's loins. The reality is that he is a product of the rape of a black woman, like numerous others on the plantation. Copper, who has been rejected by his black step-father, is psychologically fragmented as a result of the suffering he has undergone as a young boy with "Not a soul in the world to turn to" (212). In addition, the scars of suffering while he was in the jail have left an indelible impression on his mind; he can still "see the faces and hear the cries...like mice in a trap" (214).

Copper's revolt against the white man's authority has brought in a case of misrepresented manhood in comparison with the other protagonists in *Bloodline*. It is misrepresented in his derisive treatment of the other black men. He treats black men in a way that makes them appear

subordinate to him. Felix, the seventy-year-old caretaker of the plantation, is reminded of Copper's bearing as he if he was a "descendent of the slaveholders" (Babb 34) "He didn't talk to me like he was talking to a 'old man, he spoke to me like he was speaking to a slave" (204). Even though there are no mentors in "Bloodline," there are, however, two voices of reason: one is Amelia, the seventy-two-year-old black woman who looks after Frank, and the other is Felix. Both of them make attempts to dissuade Frank from his stubborn insistence of making Copper walk through the back door by sending men in batches to seize him. But neither of them is able to make either Frank or Copper heed to any semblance of rationality. Their voices are lost in the ensuing power struggle between the uncle and nephew; also their voices are too weak and feeble to dissuade Frank or bring any change in the ways of the well-entrenched plantation system of the whites. While it is expected of Frank to behave like a white plantation owner from the South, Copper's behavior separates him from his own kinsmen and stands in ironical contrast as he accuses Frank: "the chains and the sticks, You created them four hundred years ago, and you're still using them up to this day" (209). Anne K. Simpson quotes essayist Frank Shelley: "Copper's domineering, haughty, intolerant attitude ... makes him a 'carbon copy' of the white man that he hates" (224). Even as he accentuates his blackness by bringing to the fore questions like, "Who originated lynching and sexual mutilation...white men created the biased law," he still seeks to enter the Laurent world of privilege and class (151). On the other hand, his abandonment, asserts Babb, leaves him "a solitary character groping for self-identification" (32). His splintered family, Babb further maintains, "provides no sanctuary along a quest for self complicated by being neither black nor white" thus denying him a manhood achieved by the rest of the protagonists in the presence of a mentor (33).

The last story in *Bloodline*, “Just Like a Tree,” brings the quest of manhood to finality by relating it to the interest of the community at large. The journey is not limited to only a personal one but now assumes wider proportions as evident in the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement of the ‘60s. Aunt Fe defines and gives voice to the definition of pride and dignity as “Gaines allows one woman’s life to represent the larger epic of African American folk history” (Babb38). She is the fulcrum of all the aspirations of the community as the ten narratives speak of her; Leola, one of the first female narrators, sums up the impact of her presence: “Aunt Fe, Aunt Fe... the name’s been ‘mongst us like us own family name. Just like the name of God” (227).

Aunt Fe is the community’s mentor and the guiding light and inspiration for Emmanuel, the Civil Rights activist, in bringing an understanding that desire for revenge must be converted into a desire for change. She has disclosed to him his past history and its connection to the history of blacks. She has thus ensured that in his awareness of his legacy, he continues to remain active and steadfast without giving up on the on-going struggle for equal rights. The resultant success achieved would then truly honor the tenets of the historic achievement. The nearby bombings have necessitated her relocation to the North by the concerned black community. Emmanuel has firmly entrenched Aunt Fe’s teachings as he declares: “If they had killed my mother and my brothers and sisters, I’d press just that much harder” (245). He sums up the collective principle of sacrifice: “But if we stopped today, then what good would we have done? Those who have already died for the cause would have just died in vain?” (245). His commitments to the principles of the Movement and willingness to sacrifice have enabled Emmanuel to broaden his vision. He understands and anticipates the suffering and hardships he may have to endure as a result of his decision. Despite it, he perseveres relentlessly to honor the cause of the Movement. The truly heroic understanding he achieves is not to inflict harm on



others even if others were to harm his loved ones. It marks him out as a true visionary and an able leader of the historic Civil Rights Movement. The definition of manhood stands summed up in Emmanuel's ability and readiness to sacrifice, to carve out a dignified identity for the black man that is no longer dictated by the white man. It is his continual growth as a human being in the journey fostered on self-respect for oneself and others, made possible through Aunt Fe's mentoring.

Anne-Marie, the only white character in the story, who walks through the rain and stormy weather to meet Aunt Fe, serves to reinforce Aunt Fe's strong spiritual presence that transcends barriers of race. Anne-Marie's racial status and her plantation owner's background distance her from the emotional, social and cultural aspects of the Movement. She is secure in her ignorance and lack of knowledge of the desire of the black community to bring about a change: "Do they really know what they want? Are they positively sure? Have they any idea?"(241). Despite her lack of understanding of the dynamics of the Movement, her fondness for Aunt Fe surmounts the racial barriers between them: "kneeling" beside her... I lay my head in that bony old lap, and I cry and I cry – I don't know how long. And I feel those old fingers, like death itself, passing over my hair and my neck" (243). Aunt Fe has seared the bonds of the human need to connect with one another despite all the differences of race, class, age and sex. She affirms the basic universal desire of wanting to give and feeling valued which is the continuum of one human being's valuation by the community for eternity. 'Just Like a Tree' she extends and gives of herself in totality and her values continue to inspire and draw out the best in each individual.

The ultimate picture of Aunt Fe's strength and a strong will is apparent in her willing the time and place of her death. She is likened to a tree extending herself protectively and standing steadfast holding her "'folk' together, preventing the erosion of familial and cultural ties" (Babb

39). In the very act of singing the “termination song” she resolutely stays connected to the land of her birth and the people close to her heart. Aunt Fe “is both a return to the old and a resurrection of the new” a constant cycle of regeneration; of realization, maturation and growth (Babb 44). Her life along with her death testifies her principles of love, self-respect, dignity and strength of the spirit.

## In Conclusion: A World of Dignity

In *Bloodline* Gaines consistently pursues the universal themes of patience, tolerance and the need for courage to be able to let go of the past in order to bring about a present. Above all, his characters have the stellar quality of dignity, which continues to propel them ahead in their journey of seeking their identity of true manhood. Even Sonny, a six-year old, has to face insecurities and doubts. Only when his father Eddie has learned the lessons of responsibility and of being "a man after all" does Sonny likewise imbibe lessons that will stand him in good stead in his role as a mature adult (71). James, another eight-year-old, has learned all his lessons well. His experience with the world outside furthers his resilience and tolerance in the journey to incorporating the meaning of manhood. All the protagonists have the will and desire to change things for the better, and they stand tall in their readiness to endure sacrifices. Herman Beavers quotes Michael S. Harper's poem "Corrected Review." The poem brings out the element of readiness to go through it all, it is a willingness coupled with dignity.

Our mode is our jam session  
of tradition,  
past in this present moment  
articulated, blown through  
with endurance...  
(39).

Gaines traces a common history of bloodline wherein all his principal characters are united in their effort to overthrow the outer and inner shackles of self-denigrating images and replace them with a hard-won definition of manhood. In this altered state both the community and the individual are now conjoined in the continual process of renewal and growth as fear and darkness continue to be dispelled in the ongoing quest for a common good.

Gaines's vision as a writer is further explored when author Wallace Stegner once asked Gaines to describe his intended audience; Gaines replied that he wrote for no one in particular. Gaines recalled for *Publishers Weekly* that when Stegner pressed the issue, he eventually answered: "I'd probably say I write for the black youth of the South, to make them aware of who they are. [I also write for] the white youth of the South to make them aware that unless they understand their black neighbors they cannot understand themselves" (38).

His body of work will continue to inspire research as his characters in their search for their selfhood arrive at a realization of the deep-rooted connection between their quests as an eternal process, initiated in the hearts of men right from the time of slavery.

## Bibliography

### Primary Source

Ernest J. Gaines. *Bloodline*. New York: First Vintage Contemporaries Edition, 1997.

### Secondary Sources

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Contemporary Black American Fiction Writers*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1995.

Beavers, Herman. *Wrestling Angels into Song: The Fictions of Ernest J. Gaines and James Alan McPherson*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1995.

Babb, Valerie. *Ernest Gaines*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991.

Callahan, F. John. *Hearing is Believing: The Landscape of Voice in Ernest Gaines's Bloodline*. *Callaloo*. 20 (1984): 89, 90.  
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press  
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930686>

Carmean, Karen. "The Short Stories: *Bloodline* (1968)." In *Ernest J. Gaines: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Clark, Keith. *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines and August Wilson*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002.

Luscher, M. Robert. *The Pulse of Bloodline*. Estes, C. David, ed. *Critical Reflections on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*. GA: U of Georgia P, 1994.

Doyle, Mary Ellen. *Voices From the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 2002.

Lowe, John, ed. *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*. Oxford: U.P. of Mississippi, 1995.

Publishers Weekly, March 1, 1993, 38.

Simpson, K. Anne. *A Gathering of Gaines: The Man and the Writer*. Lafayette: The Centre for Louisiana Studies, 1991.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1983.

Williams, A. Dana. *Contemporary African American Fiction: New Critical Essays*. Columbus: The Ohio State U P, 2009.

## Vita

Shagun Rawat was born in India and completed all her studies in Mumbai, where she grew up. She enrolled for her Masters in English at UNO in fall 2008. She looks forward to making a career in teaching in the U.S. and continuing her studies to accomplish her goal. She will be awarded her Master's degree from UNO in May 2011.