5-1-2011

Constructing the Concept of Masculinity in black American men

Ravon D. Keith

Clark Atlanta University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/dissertations

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
ABSTRACT

ENGLISH

KEITH, RAVON

B.A. UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA, 2004

CONSTRUCTING CONCEPTS OF MASCULINITY IN BLACK AMERICAN MEN

Committee Chair: Susan Wright, Ph.D.

Thesis dated May 2011

Historically, and in literature, the concept of black masculinity is often viewed from a Euro-American perspective. This perspective makes the stages of progression to manhood problematic for black males. Since slavery, African American men have been hampered in their progress toward manhood based on the oppressors’ expedient notion that black males are incapable of self-actualization, a concept that was utilized to ensure that black males were always “boys” and, thus, more manageable. Recently, revisionist history, along with black authored literature, has resulted in a different perspective of black masculinity and black manhood. This thesis illustrates that Earnest Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Men* and Daniel Black’s *They Tell Me of A Home* offer a new paradigm for black masculinity and manhood through the perspective of their black male
characters. In Gaines and Black’s novels, black males redefine their own concepts of manhood by engaging in self-innovation through spirituality and by resisting racial oppression.
CONSTRUCTING THE CONCEPT OF MASCULINITY IN BLACK AMERICAN MEN

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTERS IN ENGLISH

BY
RAVON D. KEITH

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2011
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 2: RE-DEFINING BLACK MANHOOD

IN A GATHERING OF OLD MEN ....................................................... 12

CHAPTER 3: COMING OF AGE

IN THEY TELL ME OF A HOME ....................................................... 21

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION ................................................................. 32
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In *A Gathering of Old Men* and *They Tell Me of a Home*, black men are able to redefine their own concepts of manhood by engaging in self-innovation through spirituality and standing up to a racist system. Ernest Gaines, author of *A Gathering of Old Men*, redefines the concept of manhood through his characters by empowerment which allows them to resist the current racist system and take control of their lives. In *They Tell Me of a Home*, Daniel Black reconstructs the notion of manhood through self-discovery and spirituality. He offers the idea there is no set standard of manhood; instead, there are variations which are dependent upon environment. Environment includes the following: culture, economic status, and neighborhood. Earnest Gaines and Daniel Black offer a new paradigm of manhood where redefinition and innovation are constant.

Gaines defines manhood in a variety of ways. His novel is set on the Marshall plantation in the 1970s in Bayonne, Louisiana. Bayonne is an environment ripe for change. In this post-Civil Rights setting, blacks have yet to assert their rights. Before the story begins, Beau Baton, a white plantation boss has been shot and killed, and the main black character, Mathu, appears to be the shooter. The black men of the town are outraged by this wrongful accusation to this solid community man and leader. In response, the men decide to gather in a stance of solidarity rather than submit to white injustice. Mathu is accused of the murder because the body was found in his front yard.
Charlie, Mathu’s son, is a life-long coward and is known in the community for running away from his problems. While Mathu is the main suspect for the murder, it is Charlie who actually shoots Beau in self-defense. The plot becomes layered and complex when Charlie asks his father to take the blame for him. Charlie flees town, but unlike previous times when he has fled problems, he returns to face the accusation against him, and, thus, begins his evolution into his own self-defined notion of manhood.

Interestingly, Gaines chooses a group of elderly men, led by Mathu, a proud, dark-skinned, “pure black man” who is noted by blacks and whites alike as “a stand-up,” brave man. The plot and theme of the novel— for black citizens, led by the community’s men, to take control of their own destiny in a place that remains tied to a pre-Civil Rights racist paradigm—is advanced by the murder of Beau Baton, the white work boss on the plantation. According to Claudia Lawrence-Webb, conversely, African American men have historically been blocked from enacting the traditional African and traditional American mainstream gender roles of provider and protector. African American men’s struggle to define and achieve a masculine gender role identity in the face of constant degradation and oppression in this society has proved to be a significant challenge (628). Mathu displays confidence because, unlike the African American men who can neither fit into the African or American description of manhood, Mathu is a pure-blood African, and, thus, he is not challenged with the task of trying fit into both descriptions.

Gaines uses the most unlikely characters, old men, to evoke political and racial change in the town. Gaines portrays older black men to illustrate that although these men
are elderly, including Mathu, Clatoo, Uncle Billy, and Chimley, they are still viable to
their community. Also, these men have endured years of injustice and have grown weary
of their ill treatment. They have waited for the moment to revolt against the biased
system that has hindered them from acquiring an education, land ownership, and the
ability to protect their women and children all of their lives. Gaines depicts Mathu, one of
the main characters, as the quintessential black man. Mathu is one of the few men who is
one-hundred percent African, and, as previously mentioned, he takes great pride in this.
Also, Mathu is not afraid to speak his mind, and he does not bow unnecessarily to
authority.

Gaines juxtaposes Charlie and Mathu to show how they are different yet alike.
This is particularly important in light of the fact that Mathu and Charlie are father and
son, but Charlie has yet to evidence the strength of character his father has, intimating
that Charlie is immersed in the African American mentality of manhood, unlike his
father, Mathu. From an early age, Charlie feels as though he must be more aggressive to
gain his father’s approval. Mathu demeans Charlie because of his cowardly ways. It is
ironic that Mathu is a leader, but his son is known throughout the community for his
weakness. Charlie does not understand why his father beats him and tries to toughen him
up. Mathu does not understand Charlie’s adversity as an African American
man who is incapable of assimilating into either paradigm of manhood, African or
American. Even though Charlie is masculine in appearance and physique, he is a little
boy inside and is seen as often running away from responsibility and succumbing to
racial oppression. Gaines is showing the variations of manhood through this complex relationship between father and son. Charlie is the antithesis of Mathu. Mathu upholds the notion of what is considered to be a man of his time by being a father figure at large to his community and excelling in his job as a sharecropper. In contrast, Charlie is fifty years old and is still living in his father's home with no responsibilities: he is not married and has no children. As a result, Mathu and Charlie exemplify two different definitions of manhood. At the end of the novel, at the moment that Charlie confesses to the murder of Beau, he is redefined as a man. Additionally, Mathu is finally able to fully accept Charlie as a man, and not just his son.

In *They Tell Me of a Home*, set in Swamp Creek, Arkansas, Black offers a multidimensional perspective of black manhood through the character of Tommy Lee or T. L. as he is called in the novel. T. L. is raised in a very strict work-enforced household where his father's dominant presence is always visible. T. L. is a creative individual who enjoys reading literature, laughing, and playing with his little sister. This type of behavior is not acceptable for a young man according to T. L.'s father, Cleatis. T. L. and Cleatis have opposing opinions regarding masculinity and appropriate male behavior. Once T. L. is of age he leaves the farm and goes to college. He aspires to empower himself through education. Although T. L. is from a small town, he has heightened goals for himself. He feels that he can work just as hard academically as physically and still be a successful young man. He does not limit himself because of his rearing. He asserts the notion that self-empowerment is achieved through spirituality: spirituality relates to
being connected to one's past; God, ancestors, community, and land are essential components to the achievement of black manhood. The character of Cleatis represents a more conventional view of black manhood. He is the head of household, and has the last word regarding operations of the house. Cleatis has a single-dimensional view of manhood and how a man should behave. Towards the end of the novel, Cleatis and T. L. come to a mutual understanding and agree to love and respect each other as individual men. Their decision to forge forward in their relationship demonstrates their ability to evolve and expand their concepts of black masculinity and how they choose to define it for themselves. This act of self-actualization could not manifest itself had Cleatis and T. L. remained fixated and oppressed by the Eurocentric definition of manhood.

In relation to the themes of Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* and Black's *They Tell Me of a Home*, especially in relation to understanding black manhood and masculinity, it is important to consider aspects of achieving manhood. While on the journey toward manhood and self-actualization, males develop certain characteristics, qualities, and traits that help shape and form the boys into men. Particularly in the development stages of a black male, the concept of masculinity becomes more problematic than under ordinary circumstances. In thinking about such development, it is essential to keep in mind the “invention” of race.

Race is based on potentially harmful assumptions. The connotations associated with the colors black and white have parallel meanings when talking about black and white as races. For example, the color black is associated with the following terms: harmful, hostile, threatening, without any moral quality or goodness, illegal or
underground; while the color white is associated with terms including decent, honorable, morally pure, and innocent. With the colors of black and white having such opposite associations, the former with negative connotations and the latter with positive ones, it is easy to see how the institution of slavery only served to amplify the relationship of black skin to negative concepts.

With this in mind, it is clear that the denigration of black men began during the trans-Atlantic voyage from Africa to the United States during the diaspora. While packed in like livestock on slave ships, black males began the literal and figurative detachment from their previously close association to the land, cultural concepts—including values and mores—and rites of passages that created African boys into African men. This journey, a tumultuous and deadly one that caused the physical breakdown of African bodies, also resulted in the breakdown and emasculation of the black male psyche (Pierre, Mahalik, and Woodland 22). The loss of identity and social standing in their native land of Africa was removed from these men and replaced by a distorted sense of manhood that suggested that manhood was something that was his only if he met the “criteria.” With color as the first criteria, the African male was almost doomed to a life of perpetual “childhood.”

When slaves arrived to the Americas, they were forced into slavery. Because of the institution of chattel slavery in the United States, black people were initially perceived simply as commodities or “property” and, therefore, of lacking human qualities. Therefore, it was easy to apply the negative connotations relating to the color black to all black people, but especially to African American men. During slavery black
men were literally denied the right to be men: they could not own land, vote, seek legal or civil rights, become educated, or protect themselves or their families from injustice. The social construction of black manhood in mainstream American culture is rooted in the idea of the black man as savage, untamed, and incapable of learning. The images of black manhood have been one dimensional, and tend to focus on the inadequacies of African American males’ gender role performance. As a result, black men were “emasculated” and unable to assert themselves in the role as father or provider. The absence of a stable father figure during slavery has a direct correlation to today’s black boys’ struggle to progress into manhood. It is evident that the effect of Eurocentric views of what it is to be a man is a large determinate and inspiration for the ideas of manhood for the black male. “The philosophical aspects of patriarchy affect African American men by virtue of their socialization and the clearly defined role of gender within society. African American men are influenced by their environment and may incorporate aspects of dominant culture (Littlefield and Webb 626). This in turns causes conflict due to the force of these beliefs on the captured and enslaved men. Black men redefine their own concepts of manhood by engaging in self-discovery and self-actualization. Historically in literature the concept of black masculinity is viewed as a very specific identifiable characteristic that derives from European patriarchal society. According to Richard Lowy,

Eurocentrism signifies that Europe and European values became a foundational source of meaning through which individuals, groups and nations from the continent could develop attitudes based on emerging
ideologies of racial, religious, cultural, or ethnic supremacy over the various indigenous peoples that they encountered during the period from about 1450. (715)

Samir Amin also argues that this doctrine poses a false universalism that does not uphold humanity in real historical terms. He further charges Eurocentrism with an inability to see anything other than the lives of those who are comfortably acclimated in the modern world. Eurocentrism has brought with it the destruction of peoples and civilizations that have resisted its spread (12). Eurocentrism, therefore, constitutes both a historical and structural formation of the modern definition of masculinity in black men. This European thought process was brought to America to help keep black males oppressed and strip them of their manhood. Willie Lynch gives proof of how Eurocentric ideas of manhood were used to psychologically and physically break down the male Negro slave.

Once slaves were brought from Africa, a British slave owner, Willie Lynch, wrote a letter that gives the framework of how to emasculate, humiliate, and demean the black male slave, hence stripping him of any remnant of manhood. In this letter, Lynch specifically addresses the breakdown of the black male. Lynch states,

Let us make a slave. What do we need? First of all, we need a black nigger man, a pregnant nigger woman and her baby nigger boy. Second, we will use the same basic principle that we use in breaking a horse, combined with some more sustaining factors. What we do with horses is that we break them from one form of life to another; that is, we reduce them from their natural state in nature. Hence, both the horse and the nigger must be
broken; that is breaking them from one form of mental life to another.

Keep the body, take the mind! (Lynch Letter)

This letter, setting forth the framework of the pervasive attitude toward slavery in America, proves the complexity of black males ever achieving manhood. Bell Hooks adds to the assessment of the complexity of African American men, in slavery and freedom, achieving manhood: “gendered politics of slavery denied black men the freedom to act as ‘men’ within the definition set by white norms” (59). Being a man and being a slave are contradictions in terms.

The white male paradigm of masculinity has yet to work for the African American male. Many traits such as feeling comfortable with expressing emotions, sense of entitlement and flamboyancy, and ability to show vulnerability are notions of white masculinity. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Coot, one of the old men in the community, is told by a white man not to wear his war medals home. “He told me I was back home now, and they didn’t cotton to no nigger wearing medals for killing white folk (Gaines 104). The white man feels entitled to tell Coot what he can and cannot do, and he suggests that a black man has no right to kill any white man under any circumstances, including during a world war. This, of course, has ramifications in terms of Charlie having killed Beau. But it illustrates also the fact that black men, unlike white men, have been harnessed from birth. The structure of white families allows their young boys the freedom to explore the world with little boundaries. According to Grier and Cobbs, the biological affirmation of masculinity and identity as master is enough to insure that,
whatever his individual limitations, this society will not systematically erect obstructions
to his achievement (59). This manifesto is fed to the white boy child and helps develop
his notion of self-righteousness and entitlement. This birthright is not offered to black
American males, so they have a contrasting definition of manhood and how to achieve it.
The modern day concept of black masculinity is in direct contrast with the concept of
white masculinity. Black men have a need to be more assertive and direct. Black men do
not want to be perceived as inferior or weak. Grier and Cobbs state that black men are
encouraged to pursue, to engage life, and to attack, rather than to shrink back. They learn
early that to express a certain amount of aggression and assertion is manly (60). Black
men are often fearful to explore and search outside of their comfort zones. T. L., in They
Tell Me of a Home, states, “Both of us knew better [about the possibility of leaving their
neighborhood]; my brother Willie James would never leave Swamp Creek even if he had
the chance. It was his comfort zone, his cocoon” (Black 126). These characteristics, a
direct result of the dehumanization and suppression of black men during slavery, has
carried forward, even today, therefore illustrating that the white concept of masculinity is
impossible for black men to attain.

The idea of white masculinity is passive and less overt. Black men are more likely
to express their power physically whereas white men often use their education and
inherited wealth to define their power. The access to education and the ability to have
power is the basis of what it means to be man. In They Tell Me of a Home, Cleatis the
patriarch of the family says, “My kids gon’ go to school and learn theyselves somethin’
and be somebody. But I saw pretty soon dat I wasn’t nobody, so dat’s what I raised y’all
to be” (163). Cleatis internalizes his inability to be educated hence making him feel less of a person, much less a man.

During slavery white men were the “masters” of the plantation and black men were the incompetent “help.” In America white men are born with power, access, and opportunities. African American men, on the other hand, have had to struggle and, often, fight to attain these things that white men have as a birthright. According to Cobbs and Grier, “By contrast, for a white man in this country, the rudiments of manhood are settled at birth by the possession of a penis and a white skin” (59). With these complex and unjust ideas of masculinity and of what makes a man, A Gathering of Old Men and They Tell Me of a Home both identify and address many of the issues that revolve around the marginalization of black men and of the difficulty of black men achieving “manhood.” In these novels the characters battle with racism and with expressing their spirituality; in the end, they gain a greater understanding of masculinity that originates from their own beliefs.
CHAPTER 2

COMING OF AGE IN A GATHERING OF OLD MEN

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, black men internalize their inability to assimilate into white masculine culture, and, in turn, create their definition of manhood. The plantation's Cajun work boss, Beau Baton, is murdered just before the novel begins. Candy Marshall, the partial owner and general overseer of the plantation, discovers Beau's dead body outside of Mathu's house. Candy believes Mathu killed Beau, but Mathu is virtually her foster father and a leader of the men, so she wants to make every effort to protect him.

Sheriff Mapes finds the twelve gauge shotgun shells at the scene of the crime. In an effort to distract and confuse the Sheriff, Candy orders the men on her plantation to carry unloaded shotguns. By limiting the old men to empty shells, Candy reinforces her hierarchical position over them and demonstrates that she fails to see them as effective men. The narrator states that “she wants them to get twelve gauge shotguns, number five shells, fire the guns, keep the empty shells so that when Mapes points his finger at Mathu, they can all testify to the murder” (24). Sheriff Mapes is not alarmed by the armed black men because he knows that they do not contain ammunition. These guns are symbolic statements of manhood for the black men. For so long they have been treated as obliterate any notion of themselves as impotent men; moreover, they revolutionize themselves as black men.

Mathu is the toughest black man on the Marshall Plantation. Mathu is honored
and respected by his community. He helps raise Candy when her mother and father are killed in a car accident. Mathu is proud of his African heritage. He states, “Put myself above all—proud to be African. You know why proud to be African? Cause they won’t let me be a citizen here in this country” (182). His dark skin gives him a “tougher” appearance which serves to reinforce the aura of his masculinity. It is ironic that even though Mathu has shown exceptional ability in regard to rearing children and maintaining farmland, he has still not “earned” the right to be classified a citizen of the United States, or even more detrimental, a man.

A recurring theme in *A Gathering of Old Men* is the redefinition of black masculinity. The old men who gather at the plantation have spent their lives running from trouble. After years of social and economic subjugation in a racist system, they long to stand up and be men. The transformation that they long to undertake is best illustrated by Charlie, a legendary coward who has always been defined by his servile personality. Charlie works closely with Beau Baton, cutting and hauling cane every day. Charlie is known as a weak-willed man who always runs from trouble and takes abuse from everyone with no shame. He demonstrates his powerlessness by asking his father, Mathu, to confess to Beau’s murder. Charlie is accustomed to running away from adversity, but this incident forces him into a change in his habit. His conscience starts to overcome his innate behavior of fleeing. This time instead of fleeing he decides to face himself, and, in doing so, he realizes that his life has no purpose as a man. He makes an unsuccessful attempt at suicide by consuming a large amount of dirt. When Charlie returns to Bayonne instead of running away, he states;
I went toward that highway on the back, something there stopped me, too. Something like a wall, a wall I couldn’t see, but it stopped me every time. I fell on the ground and screamed and screamed. I heard a voice calling my name. I laid there listening, listening, listening, but I didn’t hear it no more, but I knewed that voice was calling me back here. (192)

After Charlie’s near death experience, he seems imbued with a new courage that other black men admire. He becomes completely redefined when he confesses to the murder of Beau: Charlie finally becomes a man without fear and reaches self-actualization by addressing his fears and pleading guilty to killing Beau. Gaines allows Charlie to redefine manhood by his own terms.

Gaines portrays how black emasculation during slavery has evolved in a post-Civil Rights South. Although the novel is not set during slavery, many of the men in the book suffer from issues that stem from slavery. Gaines highlights the fact that these men are old and most do not own land. Also, these men have not been able to acquire an education nor protect their women and children. According to Major and Billson,

Being a male means to be responsible and a good provider for self and family. For black males, this is not a straightforward achievement. Outlets for achieving masculine pride and identity, especially in political, economic, and educational systems, are more fully available to white males than black males. This in turn restricts the black man’s ability to achieve in family systems, to take care of a wife and family, or to be a present and supportive father. (31)
In relation to this point, it is interesting to consider the philosophy of W. E. B. DuBois who coined the term “Double Consciousness.” Double Consciousness is the state of one person living in two different realms and seeing himself through two opposite perspectives, his own eyes and the eyes of the person observing him: that person is the white person (3). In a special way, Gaines uses double consciousness throughout the novel by giving the black men two separate names. This form of duality makes it clear that these men conform to a white society when using their “government names,” and they are able to relate to each other when using their nicknames. For a long time, the public personas of the old men in the novel have silently agreed to their subjugation. When transformed into narrators, however, the old men’s spirits and dreams of willful action become evident. Their government name belongs to the world of documents and civil rights, the world to which the black men have always been denied entry. Their nickname reflects their true characters and individual personalities. The old black men exist with these two separate selves. The narrator provides the reader with a clear understanding of this double identity. The narrator states,

Chimley was sitting in the middle. He was smaller than me and Cherry Bello. Blacker than me and Cherry, too, that’s why we all called him Chimley. He didn’t mind his friends calling him Chimley, ‘cause he knowed we didn’t mean nothing. But he sure didn’t like them white folks calling him Chimley. He was always telling them that his daddy had named him Robert Louis Stevenson Banks, not Chimley. But all they did was laugh at him, and they went on calling him Chimley anyhow. (39)
Chimley illustrates that he is a man who understands both the white man’s sense of what is important and the black man’s sense of honesty. With the events at the Marshall Plantation the men are able to merge their two names and allow their dual personalities to become whole. This wholeness occurs as the men take a stance and voice their opinions against the racist system. In the final trial for the murder of Beau Baton, the characters boldly refer to each other by their nicknames rather than their government ones. This is another way in which the men rebel against the white man’s rule and redefine themselves through words.

The author comments on black masculinity through the connotative use of words and linguistics as well as how information is passed from person to person. Black illiteracy was a major tool used by white society to keep black men oppressed, but it was also an avenue used by blacks to empower each other, via the use of the oral tradition. Black men have passed along knowledge orally often times in an all-male setting: both fictional and nonfiction events were recorded in this way. Gaines uses this tradition as a way to depict the unity that the men exhibit in Gathering. News and information are dispersed orally in the black community. Uncle Billy, one of the black men in Bayonne, sits the men down and gives a detailed description of how his son had been falsely accused and punished for a crime that he did not commit. Uncle Billy says,

“What they did my boy,” the old man said, staring blankly at Mapes, his head bobbing again. His swollen bottom lip trembled nervously. “The way they beat him. They beat him til they beat him crazy, we had to send him to Jackson. He don’t know me and
his mama no more. We take him candy, we take him cake, he eat it like a hog eating corn.” (80)

Uncle Billy’s story can have a multiple of purposes: one would be to suggest that black men have suffered injustices of the American legal system for centuries, and that Mathu and/or Charlie could be additional victims of injustice if they do not stand up for themselves. But more importantly, the stories and the narrative tone recreate the thick cultural weave of the local black culture. The dialects reflect off one another, displaying the richness within the local community. The scene in which the men confess to the murder and testify to their troubles demonstrates the way story telling can become a bold act of defiance in a culture that expects blacks to be silent. The art of oral storytelling becomes a pivotal means of defining these men.

The oral tradition is used to organize the revolt against the sheriff and the white men in the town. The black men revolt against the current racist system by gathering from house to house to organize their plan of action. The men in the community are fed up with being treated like second-class citizens while breaking their backs on the plantation for mere pennies. The men explain they are standing up because of what they have suffered—sister raped, a son executed for a crime he did not commit, and a brother killed for beating a white man’s tractor in a race. They believe that Beau died for their past sufferings.

Beau Baton’s death is symbolic because he is a physical representation of oppression and degradation for the black men of Bayonne. Beau is a representative of the social order that has subjugated blacks throughout history. All of the old black men
believe Beau to have been closely linked to violent events in their past—daughters raped, sons killed, and friends attacked. There is no concrete evidence that ties Beau to each specific act, but it does not matter. Based upon the remembrances from the characters, it is clear that Beau is not a gentle or a kind figure. Charlie recalls an encounter where Beau started hitting him with a stalk of sugar cane because Beau did not like the way Charlie was working. Beau's use of force for such a minor infraction shows that he believes in the outdated technique of using violence to suppress blacks. In the American slave narrative based upon the life Josiah Henson, the author says, tells about his experience during slavery: “For [his] attempt to protect his wife from a rape, Henson’s father received a severe flogging, followed by the severing of his right ear from his head” (Roth 264). Gaines illustrates in Gathering that Beau is not far removed from the thinking of a slave owner. And to prove this, after Charlie hits Beau back, Beau prepares to murder him. In Beau's mind, shooting Charlie with a shotgun is an appropriate response to Charlie hitting him with a sugar cane. This logic is misguided, outdated, and racist. Because this logic no longer fits into the new social order, it seems somewhat appropriate that Beau is dead. Although Beau’s death will not erase the wrongs committed by all the other white men in the community, still the old men gain a certain satisfaction knowing that Beau is six feet under.

All of the men in Bayonne’s black community want a chance to be seen as men in their own way. Mat Brown, one of the men in the gathering, states “Give a old nigger like me one more chance to do something with his life. He gived me that chance and I’m taking it” (Gaines 38). The black men of Bayonne are desperate for change, and they
take initiative to charter their own transformation to manhood. The spirit evoked throughout this novel is reminiscent of Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die.” McKay puts into words what these men feel when they are confronted by the white men in town regarding Beau’s death:

If we must die
let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs
Making their mock at our accursed lot
If we must die/ O let us nobly die. (1-5)

This gathering of old men exhibits a resilience that can only be found in a group of suppressed and marginalized people. This resilience enables these men to redefine themselves by their own standards. They put their lives on the line to stand up for what they know is right in their hearts.

Gaines also defines manhood through the voice of Mathu when the sheriff tries to prompt him to confess to the murder. “A man got to do what he think right, Sheriff,” Mathu said. “That’s what part him from a boy” (Gaines 85). A Gathering of Old Men introduces a new literary perspective on black masculinity, one that constructs in literature characters that may not equate to the white standard of masculinity, but who asserts that no one true standard of manhood exists. Furthermore, this statement supports the idea that ultimately self-awareness determines manhood. Gaines’s characters exemplify innovative principles by persevering and standing up to the racially biased
system. The men defy the norms of the dominant class by creating and developing their own definition of masculinity.
CHAPTER 3

RE-DEFINING BLACK MANHOOD IN THEY TELL ME OF A HOME

In They Tell Me of a Home, Daniel Black illustrates the concept of masculinity and manhood as a quality self-defined, not a characteristic inherently acquired or God-given. The novel begins when twenty-eight year old Tommy Lee Tyson, the main character, steps off the Greyhound bus in his hometown of Swamp Creek, Arkansas. Swamp Creek is a place he left when he was eighteen, vowing never to return. Swamp Creek is foreign to him because he is now adapted to the culture of New York. T. L., as Tommy Lee is known, experiences things to which people from his hometown cannot relate. T. L. has many issues with his family life that he needs to address. T. L. states,

I had received a Ph. D. in black studies a month earlier and felt compelled to return to the place of my origin. Exactly why I didn’t know, but for some reason I felt the need to go home. My heart, or my head, had begun to twist, to beg for familial clarity, in the last several years, and maybe, I hoped, Swamp Creek could help. (Black 6).

T. L. receives a premium education, but he has yet to evolve into the man he wants to become. He believes that in returning home he will gain a better understanding of himself and this will, in turn, assist him in his progression toward manhood.

T. L.’s cold, seemingly apathetic father, Cleatis, and his emotionally indifferent mother make his return unbearable. To further complicate the situation, T. L. discovers
that his younger sibling, Sister, is dead but no one gives him the reason for her death. T. L. asks his mother about the death, “What happened, Momma?” “Did y’all kill her because I loved her? Did you and Daddy decide to fuck up my entire life by taking the only thing about this godforsaken shit hole I enjoyed?” (32). T. L. takes the news of the death of Sister really hard, and the knowledge of her death fuels T. L. to find out more about himself, if not for him, then for the loving memory of his sister.

Tommy Lee is sensitive, well mannered, and smart. Growing up he connects mostly to Sister. They spend hours together laughing at cartoons or about the local reverend and his speech impediment. T. L. and Sister would run through the woods playing hide and seek and peek-a-boo. If T. L. was not playing and laughing with Sister, he was reading a book. Cleatis looks down upon T. L.’s choice of activities and behaviors. “Men don’t giggle, boy. That shit’s for women. Next time, I’ll slap de shit outta you,” Cleatis tells T. L. concerning the boy’s behavior (84). The quality time spent with Sister balances T. L.’s disassociation with his older brother, Willie James.

Willie James and T. L.’s relationship is complex and layered. Growing up T. L. and Willie James have few interest in common. Willie James is good at sports, and T. L. cannot catch a ball in a baseball mitten. T. L. excels academically and is an exceptional reader and thinker. T. L. often makes reference to visions and acts upon his ideas and dreams. Willie James has great thoughts and ideas; however, no one really encourages him to make good use of them. T. L. knows that he had to leave home once he graduated high school. Willie James never envisions himself residing anywhere else except Swamp Creek stating, “Aunt no way I was gon’ leave here and not make it and have to come
back. I would be to ashamed and I would feel like nothin’. I’d die befo’ I let Daddy stare me in de face cause I failed” (221).

Unlike T. L., Willie James is concerned with what others think of him. Willie James immobilizes himself through his mindset. He carries a slave mentality of being afraid to step outside of his boundaries, and he makes a mockery of T. L.’s worldliness and education. Willie James represents the endangered black man who lives in fear and rejects progression. Willie James never self-actualizes as T. L. does. The friction between the brothers starts from birth, but now as men, T. L. desires a level of understanding with his brother and attempts to gain clarity of their relationship. Mending the relationship with Willie James is part of the systematic process that T. L. must achieve his goal of redefining his manhood. The turmoil between Willie James and T. L. directly stems from the abuse that they both suffer at the hands of Cleatis. Cleatis is a positive father figure; however, he mis-uses his authority and offers a jaded view of masculinity.

And some may argue that Cleatis is not a man at all because of the way he treats his children and cheats on his wife. Infidelity in black men is an issue that stems from slavery. The strongest black male on the plantation was used as a breeder to ensure a strong genetic makeup for offspring (Lynch Letter). Often times, a fit black male slave was placed on plantations to impregnate a few women, and then he would be quickly sold off before the children were born. This concept spews over to the modern theory of hyper-masculinity. Hyper- masculinity is the assertion of power and dominance often through physically and sexually aggressive behaviors. Cleatis’s sporadic and numerous
accounts of infidelity demonstrate how he attempts to clarify his masculinity through his sexual prowess. This is a non-productive way in which black men negatively define their manhood.

Cleatis’s infidelity, his use of violence, and his abuse of his children further disassociates him from his family, especially from T. L. Perhaps Cleatis is jealous of T. L. for obtaining an education and leaving home. Cleatis continually degrades and tries to diminish T. L.’s self-esteem. Within minutes of T. L.’s return home, Cleatis immediately starts to mock him regarding his education stating, “well, I think it’s funny . . . I think it’s funny a man who s’ pose to be so smart can’t even think” (54). Cleatis admits that he did not expect T. L. to amount to much. Cleatis feels manhood is measured by working hard in the fields and performing other strenuous labor. Cleatis was physically abused by his father and, as a result, he does not realize he abuses T. L. in the same manner. The internalized rage Cleatis possesses is a result of oppression; therefore, he seeks to oppress and marginalize T. L. He tells T. L., “I had enough whoopin’s for a lifetime, boy. My pa would catch me playin’ when I wuz s’pose to be workin and start beating me like a carpenter beats a nail” (162).

Hence, Cleatis is unable to express sentiments of love. He has the capacity for love, but has not been taught how to conceptualize or demonstrate it. Cleatis never reconciles his emotional dysfunction but channels it to his two sons. This continues the cycle in which the Willie Lynch “system” breaks down the black male in front of his own children, never giving the young males a clear image of manhood. According to Majors and Billson,
American society has not provided many black males with legitimate channels or resources for developing a strong sense of masculinity, status, and respect. Violence has become a readily available and seemingly realistic tool for achieving these critical social rewards; it is in this sense that violence can even become a form of achievement when everything else has failed. Sociologists refer to this as the resource theory of violence; that is, violence viewed as a resource that can be used to achieve desired goals and status when other routes to achievement are blocked. If he lacks the resources to maintain his position as symbolic head of his family, the black male may seek to maintain a semblance of position through other means, including the use of superior physical force. The language of violence is one way to write a more dominative masculine script. (33)

Cleatis's violent behavior originates from his abuse as a child as well as the pressure of not measuring up to the white paradigm of masculinity. He feels like he has failed his family and in an attempt to gain control, he uses his strength to assert and reinforce his power.

Abuse, secrets, and violence are some of the family demons that Tommy Lee has to overcome and deal with. The death of Sister is a secret that stems from the family non-communicative behavior as well as a lack of emotional and physical expression of love. The violence and abuse that surrounds them is a generational occurrence that takes a toll on the entire family unit and further perpetuates T. L.'s disconnection from them. T. L. is the mediator between Willie James and Cleatis. T. L. shows this when Willie
James confesses about Sister’s death, and he still consoles him in spite of his disgust with the situation. Willie James says, “Daddy’s gon’ kill me.” T. L. says, “No he’s not.” In this instance, Willie James is fearful of his father finding out about the truth of Sisters’s death and T. L assures him that he is not going to allow daddy to do anything to him.

The relationship with the males in the Tyson family is layered with tension, shame, pride and jealousy. Tommy Lee does not have a connection to his home. Willie James is jealous of T. L. because he feels like he was never able to have the opportunities and intelligence that T. L. acquires naturally. Willie James states, “I was never as free from Daddy as you were. I was the oldest son and I was supposed to stay by his side, right? I ain’t got nothing to claim, T. L. I was never smart like you, I ain’t neva been too good-lookin, and God aint seen fit to give me too many breaks in life” (86-87). This statement, as well as Willie James tone, suggests regret and jealousy towards T. L. Cleatis holds tension and aggression for the choices he has made for him and his family due to his childhood and he copes with his discomfiting life choices through violent behavior. Cleatis states,

“When I was a boy we had to git up ‘bout five every mornin’ and do our chores. Feed the hogs, gather cookin’ wood, milk de cow. Wunnit no such thang as sleepin’ late. Hell, six o’clock was late to us. Didn’t nobody have no high education where dey could get no good job. All we could do was sweat like damn slaves.” (161)

Cleatis allows his past to dictate his future, and T. L. is determined not to take on this negative mentality. T. L. is searching for his healing and realizes that he is looking for
answers that lie within himself. By not allowing his past to dictate his progression into manhood, T. L. has already begun his redefinition of self.

Despite T. L.’s non-communicative and disruptive relationship with his two male family members, he is able to maintain a healthy relationship with his friend, George. This friendship is especially important to T. L. and represents more to him than his familial relationships due to the societal constraints of intimate adult male-to-male friendships in Swamp Creek. Growing up, T. L. did not see men intimately engaging in conversation and sharing ideas and goals. T. L. is not positively reinforced by his father let alone held or touched affectionately by him. T. L. states, “I met George Thornton in New York, and he quickly became my best friend. Our relationship was strange from the inception because we shared an intimacy unusual for black men. We were definitely more than friends although I never found the word or category to describe adequately the extent of our bond (43). T. L. embraces the closeness that he has with George, although he never experienced an intimate relationship with another man. He allows it to reinforce his manhood by expanding his mind and allowing himself to overcome his fear of male bonding. T. L. remembers an instance when he gets off of the bus from New York where Old Man Blue, an elder patriarch of Swamp Creek, sees and embraces him. The narrator states,

Suddenly Old Man Blue’s eyes bulge and he gaped at me.

“Lawd” have murcy,” T. L. “is that you?” I reached to shake his hand but Old Man Blue grabbed me and hugged me violently. He
had caught me off guard, really, because men folk in Swam Creek didn’t
hug each other, at least not while I lived there. (12)

This incident further demonstrates how T. L. is not accustomed to male-to-male contact
and how foreign the concept is to him. T. L.’s friendship with George allows him to
define himself by his own standards rather than the ones implemented in his youth by his
family or the community of Swamp Creek.

By addressing his fears of masculinity and analyzing his life back at home, T. L.
becomes more transparent and is able to discover truth. The truth that T. L. unveils is
harsh. He comes home to learn about himself, but he does not know that he is returning
home to a crime scene. Sister is not only dead, but she has been murdered—by their
mother. His mother is enraged when she finds out that Sister is impregnated by her
brother, Willie James, and she wants to keep the baby. Sister is too far along to terminate
the pregnancy. Mother finds her having the baby in the back of the barn and, in an insane
act of violence, she takes a hoe and beats Sister to death. The blue baby is still attached
by the umbilical cord and takes his last breath as Sister takes hers.

The closure that T. L. finds with the knowledge about the death of Sister is
unsettling. It actually opens up more wounds as Willie James tells T. L. of how it all
happened. Willie James is continually jealous of Sister and T. L.’s relationship. Willie
James states, “Y’all laid in de bed and giggled for years as I laid there listenin’ to you,
hopin’ dat, one day, I’d get invited to laugh along. That day neva came ‘cause you wuz so
damn selfish. It neva crossed yo’ mind to include me in de fun” (283). Willie James tries
to explain to T. L. how sexual intercourse between Sister and him began. He states that
one night she came into his room due to her missing T. L. Willie shows Sister the only way he knows how to express love. After Willie James discloses the specifics of Sister and his incestuous relationship, T.L states, “Stop it! You know dat shit is sick! Are you sick? This is abnormal and psychotic” (283). Willie James’s disclosures infuriates and repulses T. L. and reminds him of his rationale for leaving his non-progressive hometown and dysfunctional family ten years ago.

T. L. had to leave Swamp Creek in order to develop his own identity. In spite of his ill-functioning relationship with his family, he rises above his environment and takes control of his life. He uses education as a premise to acquire and achieve his manhood. Although he is not the head of a household, nor is he a father, he is cognizant of the moral example he is to his community. T. L. is offered a position as head school master in Swamp Creek. He knows the significance of this position and the impact that it will have in the lives of the youths within the community. T. L. stretches himself to take the position and accepts that it will be a great way of giving back to his community while staying connected more closely with his family. This act alone expresses the growth and development of T. L.’s manhood. By staying in Swamp Creek, T. L. knows that he can enhance the lives of the youth of his community. T. L. understands the importance of education and having sound mentors during his life. He specifically remembers Ms. Swinton, his childhood teacher, who inspired him to always dream and excel in all that he pursues. Ms. Swinton actually dies right before he is headed back to New York and she leaves him two hundred books. Ms. Swinton says,
“I knew you would come back because you had no choice. I only hoped it would be before my time was up. A tree can never escape its roots. The day it does, it dies, and you weren’t about to die. See, son, all that abuse, heartache, and pain you carried away from here is part of you. These country folk, these trees, and those chitterlings you love so well all combine together to form your identity. I want you to take my position as Swamp Creek school teacher. No one else is as qualified as you, Thomas. You know the people, you know the territory, you have the education, and you have the intellectual savvy.” (150)

These words resonate in T. L.’s mind as he gets on the bus to depart from Swamp Creek. He also contemplates about all that has transpired with his family and how he has finally open the lines of communication with his father and brother. He knows that his healing is not complete. By getting off the bus and deciding to take the teaching position, T. L. achieves self-actualization, but it is also a step toward redefining an entire generation of men.

Towards the end of the novel, Cleatis and T. L. are having a conversation over a beer. Cleatis finally admits he does not blame T. L. for leaving home. During the ten years absence, T. L. has tried to distance himself from his rustic roots. Black allows T. L.’s character to experience a self-examination through the “mirror” of his father and brother. T. L. discovers that he has respect for the males in his life even though their lack of self-actualization remains a mystery to him. T. L. goes through a symbolic rite-of-passage as he and his father bond in a conversation by the pick-up truck. T. L. explains,
“Daddy reached into the bed of his truck and got another beer. He handed me one, too, and although I didn’t want it, it didn’t seem right to refuse the truce” (162). T. L. finally has the opportunity to approach his father without the notion of fear. He defines his masculinity by setting goals, and he accomplishes one of his goals by renewing the relationship with his father and opening the lines of communication with his brother.

Through self-discovery he has the freedom to make sound choices and decisions, and to become the man he has striven to become: accountable for his actions and how they affect others around him; one who exhibits spirituality and humanism; one whose faith is connected to his community; one who respects other men as well as himself; one who is responsible for the family and contributes to the household; one who sets a moral example and sacrifices for what he believes in. T. L. and like-minded men know that a man provides leadership for his family and does not abandon them. He is supportive of their endeavors even if they are unsuccessful. A man is self assured, has self-esteem, and aspires to self-actualization. He has goals and dreams, and he reaches far beyond mere survival. He competes with himself to motivate his people beyond limitless boundaries. These traits and characteristics are common attributes for a redefined man. The black male characters in Ernest Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Men*, and Daniel Black’s *They Tell me of a Home* serve as manifestations of redefined men for readers.
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

Through research, data collection, and the analysis of literature, my thesis makes some conclusions about the "condition" of black males in America. Slavery, with all of its confines and its brutal nature has had a long, lingering impact on black males. It serves as the root of the breakdown of black masculinity and plays an integral role in the disconnection between the black male, his family, and the community. Art imitates life; while *A Gathering of Old Men* and *They Tell Me of a Home* are fictional works, much of the context of the novels is reflective of real life experiences and the present mindset of many black males. These depictions of real life demonstrate the complexities the black male has in defining his masculinity. Gaines and Black allow their characters to evolve and become the authors of their own definition of manhood. Gaines’s character, Charlie, self-evolves by confessing to Beau’s murder. Through this act, he is no longer running away from his responsibilities, and he finally gains validation and acceptance from his father and the other men in the community. Gaines also allows the black men of Bayonne to self-actualize by standing up and fighting for their God-given rights and their future generations.

Black’s character, T. L., shows evidence of progression through attaining a high
level of education, a willingness to "give back to" his community, and by amending his relationship with his father and brother. T. L. overcomes his past inadequacies and constructs new, mature relationships with his family; as a result, T. L. achieves manhood in *They Tell Me of a Home*. 
Works Cited


