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Societal impositions and the black male as seen in three novels by Ernest Gaines

Julian L. Williams
Clark Atlanta University

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This work examines methods used by young Black males dealing with societal impositions (i.e. racial oppression, paternal rejection, mis-education, abandonment, and imprisonment) as seen in Ernest Gaines' novels Of Love and Dust (1967), In My Father's House (1978), and a Lesson Before Dying (1993).

The paper shows a direct correlation between these external impositions and the destructive behavior demonstrated by the young Black male characters.

Gaines' protagonists, who would be exterminated if Whites in power had their way, suffer from psychological trauma due to the pressures described above. This trauma causes these young Black males to act irresponsibly and thoughtlessly.

Furthermore, these young Black males receive guidance from older Black males who teach them to accept the impositions of society as a method of coping with oppression.
Also, this examination addresses the author's metatextual message regarding the social status of young Black males. Over a span of twenty-six years, Gaines depicts characters who continuously worsen and, over time, ultimately disintegrate.
SOCIETAL IMPOSITIONS AND THE BLACK MALE
AS SEEN IN THREE NOVELS BY ERNEST GAINES

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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JULIAN WILLIAMS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

Within the last decade, various societal restrictions, such as imprisonment, abandonment, miseducation, and racial oppression, imposed upon Black males by White society, have been examined and documented by many contemporary African American scholars. However, the psychological damage that results has not been so thoroughly explained. The Black male has been cast into a role that, to a large extent, has been pathological in nature. This role often depicts Black males, as Lawrence Gary suggests in Black Men (1981), as "street-corner men, pimps, deserters, criminals, hustlers, or ineffective family figureheads (Gary 11). Moreover, the Black male has been stereotyped as psychologically impotent and castrated, despondent, incredulous, nebulous, irresponsible, and suspicious (11). These labels reduce Black men to subordinate positions in society, causing others—including some Blacks—to view them as incapable of fulfilling their role as "man." Consequently, they often have trouble fulfilling their roles as husband, father, or son, as they would wish.

According to psychologists Daniel Stewart and Philip Scott, oppressive American institutions, especially in the areas of economics and education, induce aggressive responses from Black males to social and economic
frustrations (4). Black men use a variety of psychological and social coping mechanisms, including suicide, homicide, crime and vice, drugs, and alcohol, to deal with such racial oppression. As a result, both psychic as well as physical wounds are inflicted upon them, wounds which fester over time, and eventually destroy both their identity formation and self evaluation.

These males, who, as a direct result of societal impositions, appear overwhelmed with a defeatist mentality are explored sympathetically by Ernest Gaines in his novels Of Love and Dust (1967), In My Father's House (1978), and A Lesson Before Dying (1993). In these three novels, the young Black male characters cannot identify their uniqueness or value as human beings, and thus act without confidence or responsibility. Further, in each of these novels, there is an enormous primal crime present, one which places Gaines' characters in situations where the Black male is infected by "sin." This sin is not the result of inherent corruption, but an environmentally-imposed inner failing from which every subsequent incident in their lives derives meaning. For Marcus, in Of Love and Dust (1967), it consists of his release from prison and, subsequently, his mandatory servitude on the Hebert plantation. For Robert X, in In My Father's House (1978), it is his inability to prevent
his sister's rape, as well as his brother's imprisonment which impairs his life; these incidents occur, as he perceives them, because he has failed as a "man." He believes that the only way to redeem himself is to kill his father, a decision which results in his own destruction. Gaines' latest novel, A Lesson Before Dying (1993), presents Jefferson, a young Black male sentenced to death in rural Louisiana by an oppressive judicial system. He, subsequently, relinquishes his humanity and appears content to die as a "hog," for he no longer views himself as a man. It seems that over the span of twenty-six years, Gaines' perception of the plight of young Black males has worsened. This is evident by the way he presents characters--excluding Marcus on some levels--who believe that they have failed, and are somehow deserving of the tragic circumstances which have shaped their lives. He presents characters who, because of circumstances beyond their control, have been symbolically castrated and are hence, according to Richard Barksdale, the "wounded Adams" of the Black experience (Barksdale 413). It is the psychological warp created by the ills of society (racism, paternal rejection, poverty, education) which results in each characters, inability to function responsibly. Gaines' treatment of young Black male characters living in racially-oppressive, Southern communities, face
circumstances which disallow their maturation, inhibit their self-actualization, and ultimately destroy them. In this paper I will explore the connection between the character's evolution and, what seems to be, Gaines' perception of the plight of the Black male.
CHAPTER 2

MARCUS:

A WILL TO SURVIVE

In *Of Love and Dust*, Gaines introduces readers to Marcus who, after being released from prison for murder, is hostile toward both Whites in power and the Black men he encounters while working off his sentence on the Hebert plantation. When James Baldwin, in a letter written to his nephew, vehemently describes the plight of the African American male, particularly with regard to his White counterpart, he is speaking about younger brothers like Marcus. The letter reads:

You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were Black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Wherever you have turned ... you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and how you could do it) ... well, the black man has functioned in the whiteman's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations ... You have, and many of us have, defeated this intention: and, by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp on reality. But these men are your brothers--your lost, younger brothers. (Baldwin 19-21)

This is the case with Marcus as well. As Baldwin so
eloquently points out in his letter, they "... believed that your imprisonment made them fell safe [and] are losing their grasp on reality" (21). After Marcus is released from prison, the White man no longer feels safe, and, thus, must devise a plan to eliminate the source of his fear. After being released, Marcus' only recourse, besides prison, is to work on the Hebert plantation. Here, Marcus can work off his sentence and still be exposed to some semblance of civilization. Marcus' imprisonment, his confinement, his seclusion from society makes, as Baldwin suggests, White men feel safe and secure. When this young Black man is released--this young Black male who possess a rebellious spirit, one which cannot be restrained--he affects everyone he encounters by disturbing the status between Black and White. Marcus has nothing but contempt for Whites in power, especially the plantation overseer, Sidney Bonbon. He attempts to seduce Bonbons Black mistress, Pauline, and succeeds in seducing his wife, Louise. Because his actions disturb the status quo of other Blacks on the plantation--those who appear both complacent and content--Marcus is resented by his coworkers. It is only because Marcus' godmother requests the assistance of Jim Kelley, the older, wiser tractor driver, that he befriends the rebellious Marcus. Grudgingly, however, Jim begins to admire Marcus' spirit and eventually
realizes that he, Jim, can no longer live as a disempowered Black male on the plantation.

Miss Julie, Marcus' Godmother, commits herself to helping him withstand the trials of living in a racially oppressive Southern community. As Lorraine Hansberry's Lena Younger, in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), attempts to help her son, Walter, mature into manhood in the absence of his paternal figure, Miss Julie attempts to do everything in her power to help Marcus develop and survive in a society that not only fears strong Black men, but demeans them as well. In Gail Stokes' "Black Man, My Man Listen!" she explains that the Black woman has attempted to, speaking to her Black man, "embrac[e] you, emphasiz[e] with your pitiful plight, because I know how they have used and abused you" (Bambara 111). She states that "Day after day I prod and push you along..." (111). This is done to give the Black man both comfort and motivation in a society that refuses to allow, without a fight, his development into manhood. Miss Julie, seeking assistance in this quest, requests that Jim help Marcus while he works on the plantation. It is Miss Julie, as Jim soon discovers, who has insisted that Mr. Marshall, her former employer, use his influence with the sheriff to have Marcus released from prison. It is Miss Julie who has blackmailed Mr. Marshall with, as she inadvertently informs Jim, information regarding her
knowledge about his paying Bonbon to kill a man for him. Upon hearing this, Jim now understands several things which were, previously, mysteries to him. He says to himself:

So that's why Bonbon steals half of everything that grows on the plantation. Marshall can't do a thing about it. So that's--but wait. Wait just one minute. You know about it, too, don't you? Is that the reason he got Marcus out of jail? ... I kept on asking myself. Why? Who is this boy and why? I knew that white men bonded colored boys out of jail for a few hundred dollars and worked them until they had gotten all their money back two and three times over. But I was trying to figure out why Marshall Hebert would do this when he already had more people than he needed. Now I knew. This little old lady had the finger on him too. (Gaines 13)

Miss Julie, unlike everyone else who encounters Marcus, is compelled to believe that he is more than just a murderer. She understands that circumstances, such as Marcus' mother being deceased and his 'daddy just run[ning] off and le[aving] him" (12), have retarded his maturation in a society where those young Black males who are unsure of themselves are destined to fail. Even though she detests the idea of Marcus working for Bonbon, who "... got to try you, he got to break you" (11), to Jim she says "you can talk to him, Mr. Kelley. You look like a person he'll listen to" (11). While observing Miss Julie, Jim realizes "That old lady sure could talk sorrowfully when she wanted to" (12); and after listening to her complain about her failing health, and
understanding that the plantation can kill a man just as prison can, Jim decides to "do [his] best," watching after Marcus. Jim, when describing the way Miss Julie stares at him, informs the reader that

She knew I would look after Marcus, she knew I wouldn't say anything about Marshall and Bonbon... Old people look at you like that for two reasons. One, when you've done something wrong. The other is when they want you to do something for them. The thing they want you to do usually turns out to be a burden. The heavier the burden, the longer they look at you. And Miss Julie looked at me a long time. (15)

Even though Jim agrees to safeguard Marcus for Miss Julie, he views her manipulative tactics, both with himself and Mr. Marshall, to be beyond contempt. He states:

To me she was a little old gangster just like Bonbon was. She was even worse than Bonbon. Bonbon was white and you expect this of white people. But she was my own race—and a woman, too. (15)

What Jim fails to realize is that protecting Black males by any and all means is not something which is new for Black women, but rather something that they have practiced, consistently, throughout history; whether it be cheating, stealing, lying, or even murder, the Black woman has proven that she will do whatever required to assist the survival of the Black male.

Therefore, in requesting that Jim Kelley help watch Marcus, Miss Julie is hoping that Jim can show Marcus that fighting the White system is not the answer, but
rather assimilation, as Jim has done, is the key. Jim
does not appear disturbed, in the least, by his
subordinate position on the plantation. He often
reflects to a period in his life when he had a woman and
aspired to have a family; but, now, he has resolved that
those thoughts are merely his past and his dreams, and
the plantation is his present as well as his future.
Jim, as many older Black males have done, has come to the
realization that Black men cannot overcome their
subservient position in America, and he contends that to
fight it, to attempt to change what White America,
obviously, does not want disturbed, will result in either
imprisonment or death. In a conversation between Jim and
Marcus, Jim is attempting to convince Marcus not to try
to escape the plantation:

Jim: It won’t work, Marcus... You’ll need
money, you’ll need food, you’ll need a
car. It won’t work.
You’ll just end up in Angola.

Marcus: I can’t stay here ten years, Jim... I
can’t even stay here ten weeks...

Jim: You can if you make up your mind to do it
Marcus... If you try, if you try hard.
And I’ll be around here... I’ll be here.
I’ll do all I can to...

Marcus: I can’t stay here, he screamed at me now.
Can’t you see I ain’t like that. Can’t
you see ... (199)

Here, the reader sees how complacent Jim has become over
the years, which is most evident by the way he suggests
that anything, even a life dedicated to those who despise
Black maleness as Bonbon and Mr. Marshall demonstrate, is better than trying to escape. Jim has decided that it is easier, and safer, to discontinue a battle which he believes is hopeless.

At the same time, Gaines is presenting Marcus, a character who refuses to allow the White racist system to restrain his sense of maleness as it has Jim and the other workers; instead, upon arriving on the plantation, Marcus displays a defiance toward the conformist mentality which all the other workers have accepted and is, thus, viewed as being an arrogant trouble maker. Marcus laughs at the seemingly complacent attitude which Jim and the other workers display, and he refuses to listen to anyone. Marcus resists, at first, wearing work clothes, choosing instead to dress in silk shirts and dark sunglasses. This is an example of the level of defiance Marcus demonstrates toward the plantation system; it demonstrates a desire to retain a sense of self, to reserve some level of personal agency. By refusing to wear the "convict shit" clothes, and refusing to assimilate into the complacent worker mentality, Marcus is attempting to remain an individual; also, he is showing everyone that he has not learned the rules of the survival game in America, as Jim and the other workers have. These rules, which White America established, have let Black males know that if they
attempt to assert their maleness, the punishment will be cruel and severe. It is not until Marcus realizes that one of his enemies in the fields is the harsh weather, and that if not dressed appropriately, he could experience heat stroke, that Marcus finally begins to conform, momentarily, to plantation existence.

It is because Jim has accepted his position as a subordinate Black man in society, coupled with Marcus' refusal to conform, that causes the two—-one older and wiser, one younger and rebellious—-to clash on the racially oppressive plantation. At first Jim and Marcus disagree about everything. They constantly quarrel over Marcus' refusal to abide by the rules of the plantation. Marcus does not despise the men he works with in the fields; rather, he despises the plantation system, and what it has done to these so-called men. The problem the two men have is that, on one hand, Jim has decided to stop resisting the suppression which Whites have inflicted upon him, while on the other hand Marcus has not accepted plantation life as his fate. Jim is so resigned to the plantation that he, a man who, unlike Marcus, can leave at anytime, has chosen to remain because he is familiar with the plantation system and has already experienced and fled the cruelties of the outside world. Jim advises Marcus, when he learns of his plans to leave the plantation, to "Do your work and forget all
these deals. They'll never work out. All you can do is make things harder for yourself and for everybody else around here" (224-225). Marcus, who is younger and less worldly, fights the idea of becoming like Jim and the other Blacks on the plantation, choosing instead to remain an individual and, if necessary, suffer the consequences.

Furthermore, Marcus has no intention of remaining on the plantation a moment longer than necessary. He vehemently expresses his disdain for the place:

They think I'm go'n stay on this fucking place any five years, they got another thing coming ... Shit ... seven years from now I won't even remember the name Hebert ... Soon as they have that little fifteen cents trial, I'm picking my chance ... (30)

Marcus believes that he is different from the other Black men on the plantation. He informs Jim that:

I had it all figured out when I walked out of jail, .... Shit, you don't think I come here to stay, do you? ... Shit .... They don't nut this kid like they done nut the rest of y'all around here. (30)

Marcus believes that he could never be content working the fields. This is due in large part to the fact that Marcus' spirit, due to his youth, is young, vibrant, full of life, and not yet ready to concede defeat. Also, Marcus, observing the way other Black males have been broken, resists their complacent mentality because he resents what it has done to the other workers.
Therefore, what Gaines is demonstrating through Marcus is a character who possesses an attitude which is viewed as "cocky," but is actually a form of self-protection, so much so that one could easily assume that, somehow, his fate might be dissimilar to that of his aforementioned brothers on the plantation. At no point in Of Love and Dust (1967), does Marcus give the impression that he might accept, as Jim has, the circumstances which encompass his life. Unfortunately, everyone else knows what his fate will be. Everyone but Marcus. Jim is constantly warning Marcus that Bonbon will kill him if he suspects that Marcus has been bothering his Black mistress, Pauline, or his wife, Louise. The elders on the plantation, Aunt Ca'line and Pa Bully, foreshadow Marcus' inevitable doom, when they say

Pa Bully: That one won't be here long... And on the other hand he might.

Aunt Ca'line: Six feet under you mean?

Pa Bully: Six feet under... (74).

Even when Marcus believes "[He] can't go on like this," with hands blistered, and shoulders sore, He still demonstrates a defiant spirit when speaking with Jim about his plans for the evening:

Jim: Taking off.

Marcus: Going courting.

Jim: Courting?
Marcus: Miss Guerin.
Marcus: Uh-huh.
Jim: Don't go there, Marcus.
Marcus: I'm going.
Jim: My grip tightened on his arm. Don't go there, Marcus... You want him to kill you, don't you?
Marcus: He ain't go'n kill me, you know that.
Jim: Don't push your luck, Marcus. (58)

Through Marcus, Gaines presents a young Black male character who is without fear, shame, or reproach. Marcus has made up his mind not to live like the other men on the plantation. He lacks fear and, at times, common sense, primarily because Miss Julie always attempted to protect him from the brutality of White America. Unfortunately, Miss Julie is not on the plantation to protect Marcus from Bonbon, Mr. Marshall, or his own ignorance. Marcus not only displays this brashness in the fields, or in pursuit of Bonbon's women, but also regarding his crime of murder.

Marcus believes that the crime, for which he was sentenced to prison, was self defense; this is an assertion that he is never afraid to address or defend. When Jim suggests that Marcus is absent of morality and decency, asking "That boy you killed don't mean a thing, does it" (31), Marcus immediately responds "Nigger come
on you with a knife, what you suppose to do, just stand there? Get him 'fore he get you" (31). Marcus explains to Jim that on the evening in question he, a womanizer (and proud of it), was assaulted in a nightclub by an extremely strong "nigger" named Hotwater, and two of his friends. Even though Hatwater was big and strong, "he didn’t know anything about covering up" (53). Marcus remembers "The nigger kept his face unguarded... His left cut the nigger’s face so much it looked like beef liver" (53). It was at this point that Jim, remembering what Marcus has told him, explains, "the nigger wanted to change tactics" (53). Now, Hotwater wanted his knife. By the time the nigger got out his knife, [Marcus] had got out his own, too. He said he let the nigger get two good whacks at him (he always believed in playing fair, himself); then he threw the knife into the nigger’s belly far as he could. (53)

Because Marcus believes his actions justified, he becomes extremely defensive whenever anyone criticizes his decision which, if he had not made, would have resulted in his own death. He is adamant about how "[He] wasn’t going to spend no five years in Angola for a chickenshit nigger like that" (54), because "if he had o’ fit me fair he wouldn’t a been dead" (54). Also, Marcus is completely aware of how Whites, in positions of power, oppress Blacks. Marcus, during his youth, observed similar forms of oppression while watching his godmother clean the homes of White men and, even now, he sees this
oppression being imposed on the plantation workers—who appear to be little more than indentured servants—as well as his own personal experiences with the police. He informs Jim, regarding his killing Hotwater, that the police "was probably there all the time" (54), and that they "just wanted to see one nigger kill another one" (54). Whites have shown, throughout history, that one of the most efficient ways to destroy a people is to allow them to destroy themselves. Marcus is simply reiterating the fact that genocide exist, and further, that he recognizes it.

Marcus' youth, and utter ignorance to the degree which White men view property, is what allows him to continue, even after prison, to involve himself in complicated situations regarding women who are involved with other men; particularly problematic is the fact that Pauline and Louise are considered the possessions of Bonbon. Even though Marcus has already spent time in jail for killing a man over a woman, he continues his flirtatious and suggestive behavior towards them. When Marcus sees Pauline Guerin, Bonbon's Black mistress, coming down the road, and learns that she is supposed to be off limits to everyone except Bonbon, he informs Jim that "I'm taking that Black woman" (56). When Marcus realizes that Bonbon not only has a White wife at home, but a "beautiful" Black mistress as well, he becomes both
enraged and dismayed at the Black men on the plantation, including Jim. Marcus expresses such feeling because he realizes that, once again, as White men did during periods of Black enslavement, Bonbon has taken a concubine, impregnated her, and made her no more than his own chattel. He ask Jim "So he got two, huh? A black one down in the quarter and a White one up here" (56). When Jim confirms this, Marcus asks "And y'all don't do a thing, don't even chunk on his house at night" (56). Even though Marcus never has sex with Pauline he takes liberty to visit her at will. Unfortunately, Marcus is unable to have any positive affect on the years of brainwashing that Pauline has experienced. Pauline believes herself to be in a position of power, for indeed she no longer works the fields, but rather in the "big house." She, as well as her children, are, in her eyes, provided for by Bonbon better than any Black man could. Lastly, because she is treated well, she appears actually to love Bonbon--a man who appears to love her back, but who, nevertheless, views her as a possession.

Eventually, Marcus is successful in his attempts to seduce Bonbon's wife, Louise. She is a small woman, one who resembles a child, and one who is in desperate need of attention--attention which Marcus is willing to provide. Marcus' decision to seduce these women is far more involved than just physical attraction. At first,
Marcus is not really interested in Louise at all. He simply wants to insult Bonbon, to participate in his game of power play. Marcus is actually taking revenge on Bonbon, and all White men like him, who think that they can oppress Black men and, at the same time, have a White wife and a Black mistress. Unfortunately, Marcus is unable simply to seduce these women. Instead, he inadvertently falls in love with Louise, an act which eventually costs him his life.

Marcus' problems with Bonbon are more complex than the fact that Bonbon is working him "nearly to death;" rather, his problems include his personal rebellion against, what Richard Wright calls "Jim Crow education." Most of the other workers get along with Sidney Bonbon, according to Jim, because they abide by his rules--due to fear--without question. What makes this such a difficult process for Marcus is that the other workers, unlike himself, have taken on what Wright refers to in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1937), as the "symbols of fear," which obviously govern the lives of the other Blacks on the plantation. Wright explains that while his mother beat him severely for not hiding from Whites during a violent altercation, she, at the same time, "Impart[ed] to me the gems of Jim Crow wisdom" (Foresman 233). This experience changed Wright's life. He states,

I was never to throw cinders anymore. I was never to fight any more wars. I was never,
never under any conditions, to fight white folks again. And they were absolutely right in clouting me with the broken milk bottle... She finished by telling me that I ought to be thankful to God as long as I lived that they didn’t kill me. (322)

Wright’s experience is similar to what happened to rebellious Black men during periods of enslavement. They would resist the White power structure until after so many beatings and, often, after watching others who were enslaved conform, these Black men eventually accepted their position as unchangeable. The same can be said for Jim and the men on the plantation, who, having experienced the "whip" of White America, choose to discontinue any form of resistance because it appears hopeless.

Marcus refuses to live his life this way. He refuses to cower in fear every time Bonbon comes near him. Marcus, similar to the African trickster, only gives Bonbon respect so that Bonbon will feel comfortable, while he is actually seducing his wife. He deceives Bonbon into thinking that he sincerely wants to do a good job when raking his leaves, when in actuality Marcus’ intentions are much more calculated. When Bonbon instructs Marcus to clean his yard, Marcus replies "Yes sir,... I’ll surely be there, sir. And I’ll do a good job, sir. You won’t even recognize it when you get back" (Gaines 134). Only Marcus and Jim know what Marcus’ ulterior motives are. Jim tells Marcus "Don’t mess with
that woman.... "(134), and Marcus replies "I'm going to rake his leaves,... the man want me to rake his leaves .... "(134). Marcus is not only rebelling against Bonbon, but also against the cycle Wright describes in his essay--the one that results in the Black man feeling afraid and desolate--the same cycle which fosters the mentality which the other workers on the plantation display. This is why Marcus refuses to succumb to the abuse that Bonbon directs toward him--abuse that Bonbon is more than capable of backing up.

Bonbon is described, physically, as very capable of keeping the workers in line, and, due to his rugged looks, he is considered appealing to women. His physical stature is:

about six-four or five,... he was an impressive looking man. He was handsome... but nothing pretty or cute ... He was handsome in a rough way. He had a good build--maybe two hundred, two hundred and ten pounds. He had light gray eyes, a long good shaped nose, and a dry-shuck color mustache ...(79).

His demeanor is described by Aunt Ca'line to be that of a "simple man and a brutal man" (67). When he began working on the plantation, he was instructed to, with a horse and whip, "ride behind the blacks in the field and get as much work out of them as [you can]" (67). Bonbon is effective at his job. He breaks the spirits of young Black men like Marcus who arrive on the plantation. He teaches Marcus a lesson about life for the Black male in
America when he demonstrates his brutality by shooting a hawk in flight. Marcus understands the lack of morality that accompanies the White man’s authority. Similar to Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, Marcus believes “White people are not a people at all, but something more, a sort of great natural force, like a ‘stormy sky looming overhead’” (Howe 65). This is demonstrated, as Jim describes, when he notes the effect the shooting has on Marcus, stating:

From the way Marcus stood there looking back at Bonbon, I could tell he had been looking at him a long time. So it was Bonbon who let me know Marcus had been looking at him and not the hawk. And it was the look in Marcus’ face that let me know Bonbon hadn’t given the hawk a break when he didn’t shoot him on the limb; he had shot twice because he wanted to show Marcus how good he was. (41)

Bonbon’s brutality is also displayed when he gives Marcus a sack to wear across his shoulders while loading corn onto the tractor. Jim describes how this form of torture works:

I stopped when I got to the end and looked back, and he already had the sack hanging on his shoulder. It had happened like this ... I had seen it happen before and I knew what had taken place... Marcus finally understood what the sack was about and slipped it over his shoulder... Already the rope had started to eat through that green shirt at his shoulder. Five more ears of corn, and the sack felt twice as heavy. Five more and Marcus could hardly move. (38-39)

Afterward, in a discussion about the brutality which Bonbon displays, Marcus asks Jim to:
Marcus: Look at me, [Marcus said] holding out his hands. I can't even hold a fork right.

Jim: I looked at his hands. Both of them were blistered and raw...

Marcus: Jesus, have mercy... Did he have to put that rope on the sack? Couldn't he put a strap or something? (46)

This shows how Marcus is physically affected by the cruelty of Bonbon; but, Marcus does not let this break him, psychologically, as Bonbon had hoped. When Jim tells Marcus that "It won't kill you" (46), Marcus replies, with confidence, "No, I aint go'n die, that's for sure" (46).

Bonbon's attempts to "break" Marcus are met with resistance because Marcus refuses to allow the cruelties of White America to distract him from his plans for the future. From the beginning, Marcus' intentions were to escape the plantation, and, eventually, head North. Once he falls in love with Louise, his plans, which will be considerably more difficult, remain the same, only now he must include a White woman and her child. Nothing, not the threat of Bonbon, Mr. Marshall, or the other Blacks on the plantation can alter Marcus' plans. When he reflects on his life on the plantation, Marcus tells Jim "Things can't get harder for me... I'm a slave here now. And things can't get harder than slavery" (225). Marcus truly believes that to live as Jim and the others have, to accept the plantation as his fate, to remain
there because it is safe, is no way to live at all; his philosophy, when Jim asks him if he cares if the "whole world burned down," is "Long as I ain't caught in the flame" (225). Bonbon cannot break Marcus, the plantation system cannot convert Marcus, and White America cannot contain Marcus; in the end, as White America has done consistently with strong willed, independently minded Black men, Marcus' fate is sealed, as the elder Blacks predicted, in death.

Marcus is completely ignorant to the diabolical scheme that Mr. Marshall has planned both for him and Bonbon--a plan which will force Bonbon to leave the plantation, and at the same time kill the troublesome Marcus. At first, the plan, which Mr. Marshall approaches Marcus with, is that if he will kill Bonbon, then he (Mr. Marshall) will arrange it so that Marcus can leave with Louise and her daughter. It is at this point in the novel, when Marcus reveals this plan to Jim, that Marcus is able to show Jim that he is not devoid of morality, stating "I killed that nigger cuse that nigger was go'n kill me. But I ain't no hunting dog to go round killing people for nobody else" (197). Jim, who from the beginning, was very skeptical about Marcus and his ulterior motives, finally believes him, thinking:

At first I didn't believe Marcus, but now I did. Because while he was talking, I was thinking about Marshall and Bonbon. I knew, from what Miss Julie Rand had said, that there
was bad blood between them. And if Marshall wanted to get rid of Bonbon, what better way to do it than use Marcus to do it for him. Marcus already had the reputation for fighting, and anybody who worked around him and Bonbon could see that they didn’t get along. So why not use Marcus to get rid of Bonbon. (197)

Also, Jim realizes that if this is Mr. Marshall’s plan, he may be unable to stop it because, as he states, "Marshall was too big" (197). The difference between the threat of Bonbon and the threat of Mr. Marshall is that

If it was just Bonbon who wanted to hurt Marcus, you might be able to prevent that. Bonbon was nothing but a poor white man, and sometimes you could go to the rich white man for help. But where did you go when it was the rich white man? You couldn’t even go to the law. He was the police, he was judge, he was jury. (198)

Marcus, blinded by his love for Louise and his hopes for freedom never imagines the double-cross that Mr. Marshall has planned.

Thus, Marcus, who is ever ignorant to Mr. Marshall’s plans for the former’s demise, is killed by an even more ignorant Bonbon. Marcus really believes that Mr. Marshall is going to give him a car (with a gun in the glove compartment), money, and his blessings to take Louise and her daughter, Tite, away from the plantation. Mr. Marshall even proves himself to Marcus when he, using his political influences, gets Marcus a full pardon. Next, he provides Marcus with a car and money at the time and place promised; Mr. Marshall also promises Marcus
that he will arrange for Bonbon to be far away when Marcus leaves. What Mr. Marshall has no intention of doing, however, is letting Marcus go free. One way or the other, Mr. Marshall plans to be rid of both Marcus and Bonbon. Either Marcus will kill Bonbon and in turn be killed by either Bonbon’s brothers or the police, or Bonbon will kill Marcus and have to leave the plantation. Either way, Mr. Marshall will be satisfied. Even though Marshall hates Bonbon, he arranges it so that when Marcus and Bonbon meet in combat, the gun, which Mr. Marshall promised Marcus, will not be there. This is because Mr. Marshall removes the weapon from the glove box before departing with Bonbon. Even after Bonbon kills Marcus, he, in an attempt to defend his actions explains what he has gathered from the situation. Jim remembers:

He told me he knew Marshall had put [Marcus] up to this— that Marcus was supposed to kill him, not him killing Marcus. But Marcus didn’t have the gun that Marshall had put in the dash drawer. Bonbon told me he had seen Marshall searching in the other car after he went in the yard, but he didn’t know until after the fight what Marshall was looking for. He told me he didn’t want to fight Marcus, he was hoping Marcus would run from him... But when Marcus didn’t run, he had to fight him. Not just fight him, but he had to kill him. If he hadn’t killed Marcus, he would have been killed himself. (277)

In the end, Marcus is seen by the White Southern community, as nothing more than a criminal who got what he deserved. According to the record, after Bonbon’s hearing, this is what happened:
Marcus had stolen Marshall Hebert's car and was trying to run away with Louise when Bonbon accidentally caught them. Marcus started a fight with [Bonbon] and Bonbon killed him trying to protect himself. Nothing was brought up at the hearing about Marshall.

(277)

Marcus' death affects everyone whom he encountered on the plantation. Soon after the hearing, Bonbon, along with Tite, leaves the plantation. Pauline leaves a few nights later with her twin sons. The night of the fight, some people had taken Louise to a hospital in New Orleans. Not long thereafter, Louise is taken to an insane asylum. Eventually, Mr. Marshall informs Jim that it would be best that he leave the plantation. Unfortunately, even as Jim prepares to depart the plantation system toward a different life, he, while speaking with and observing the older, and even more desolate Aunt Margaret, realizes that "I'll be like this one day" (279). At the same time he understands "But Marcus never would have been like this" (279). It is unfortunate that Jim did not realize how special and, unfortunately, rare independence and self-respect are for Black men in the South, until after Marcus' death; with his wisdom and Marcus' youthful exuberance they may have successfully found ways for dealing with oppression in the South. They do not, however, because when Black men, like Marcus and Jim, do not come to terms about their
differences, they serve merely as pawns--manipulated and controlled--by White racists like Mr. Marshall Hebert.
CHAPTER 3
ROBERT X:
THE PAIN OF ABANDONMENT

Another of Gaines' characters who experiences problems trying to attain manhood in White America is Robert X in *In My Father's House* (1978). Once again, Gaines shows readers two characters, one young and extremely troubled, the other, his father, more mature and established. This time, unlike Marcus in *Of Love and Dust* (1967), the young Black male, Robert X, is suffering from impositions, including parental rejection, racial oppression, and societal rejection which impair his ability to act responsibly regarding his own sense of self; he is so distraught over his inability to function as a "man" that his life is governed by both anger and misery. As Marcus appeared, at times, confident that he would overcome the racial environment which attempted to constrict his existence, Robert X is much more disturbed regarding his sense of self. He feels that he has been abandoned, betrayed, and left the task of supporting his family—a position that, because his father, who felt emasculated in White America, left before instilling the guidance of manhood, Robert X is unprepared to handle. The fact that Robert X is the oldest child, leaves the responsibility of a mother, sister, and brother on his
narrow shoulders—shoulder which cannot bear the strain of manhood.

Robert X is uneasy in the role of "man" due to the fact that his father abandoned his family. This abandonment is looked upon by Robert not only as a desertion of the familial unit, but also as a personal rejection of him as a son. He responds by relinquishing his birth name, Etienne, preferring instead to be called Robert X. The "X" represents the "unknown" in his life; it suggests that he is so unsure—so unaware of himself that he has a lack of identity. Gaines allows the reader to share in the tormented memories surrounding the day Robert X's father, Phillip Martin, departed, via one of Robert's many flashbacks:

That was twenty-one years ago, but I can still see them, feel them, smell them. Even after she made me bring them back to you I could smell the stink in my hand. Three dollars. A dollar for each one of us. That's what you paid. A dollar for each one of us. (Gaines 101)

Robert believes that his father not only paid his children what he thought they were worth, but that he also "... treated [his mother] like a common whore" (101). X's assessment of the entire situation is that his father "... never loved her, or us. [He] raped her. [He] tried to pay us off with three dollars" (101). Robert believes that, as a man, and, as a father, Phillip's duty was to remain faithful to the household
regardless of his own inner failings. The fact that Phillip left his wife and children convinces Robert that his father is no better than a con man; he lied and cheated to seduce his mother, and when the situation became more complicated with the addition of children, he paid them three dollars to ease his conscience and fled like a thief in the night. Joseph Moynihan, in his famous *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (1967), suggests that "Negro children without fathers flounder and fail" (Moynihan 81). This is how Robert X perceives his life. As a result of his father's rejection, he feels that he has failed to become a "man." Robert X's existence is regulated by resentment and regret. He resents the fact that his father abandoned his family to move to St. Adrienne, remarried, and became a successful minister/civil rights leader. When he looks upon his father and reflects on the squalor in which he and his mother lived, "...he laugh[s]. He look[s] at Phillips expensive clothes, laughing. He look[s] at the jewelry on his hands, laughing" (Gaines 100). He becomes angry when he considers the fact that now his father is "... down here saving souls. After you destroyed us, you down here saving souls" (100). Robert views his father as a hypocrite. What he sees upon arriving in St. Adrienne is his father, the renowned pastor Phillip Martin, who has the nerve to give advice
to his congregation regarding "strong marriages" and "raising children." The younger brothers in the congregation admire and attempt to emulate Phillip Martin. Also, Phillip Martin is a role model for children, and all the women wish that their husbands could be more like the pastor. Thinking of this makes Robert laugh, because he believes that his father, by the way he treated Robert, his mother, and his siblings, obviously knows nothing about familial obligations and does not deserve the respect of the town. Robert believes that, once again, his father is working a con, more elaborate than before, but still just a con. After seeing Phillip Martin and his new life, Robert reaffirms the negative images which he has formulated over the years regarding his father.

Haki Madhubuti suggests in Black Males: Single, Obsolete, Dangerous? (1990), that Black males must be able to offer their families a measure of protection and, at the minimum, basic life giving needs, such as clothing, shelter, food, education and security in order to celebrate their existence as men (Madhubuti 191). In fact, in most cultures, if a man does not provide these things, he is condemned or at least frowned upon and his manhood is ridiculed (191). Once reunited with his son Robert X, Phillip Martin attempts to explain that when he was with Johanna, Robert's mother, he was psychologically
flawed, and that the sins of the father have been, inadvertently, passed on to the son. Phillip Martin, in a moment of self-reflection, informs his son that he was incapable of providing for his family, stating:

Yes, I had a mouth, but I didn't have a voice. I had legs, but I couldn't move. I had arms, but I couldn't lift them up to you. It took a man to do these things, and I wasn't a man. I was just some brutish animal who could cheat, steal, rob, kill—but not stand. Not be responsible. Not protect you or your mother. (Gaines 102)

Here, Phillip is attempting to explain that he lacked all of the characteristics which Madhubuti describes. Phillip is attempting to explain that he did love his family, but the fact that he felt emasculated in White America, was unable to find work, unable to provide in a sufficient manner for those who depended on him, is what forced him to act in an irresponsible manner. The description which Phillip gives of himself during that period is one of a savage animal. He suggests that he was not a man then, but a cowardly male—one who could produce children, but not raise them. Although not identical, these are similar feelings of inadequacy which Robert X now experiences regarding his family.

When Phillip left his household, the position of "man" of the house fell on Robert's shoulders, a position which Robert, as a child, was not ready to handle. Phillip Martin chose to get married, he chose to try and have a family in a society which has, historically,
attempted to divide Black familial units. Robert X never had an option. He was never able to date and fall in love. He was not given the choice of whether he wanted to have children. All of these decisions, via his father's departure, were made for him. He, as the eldest male, had to step up and assume the duties of the father. Robert had to find work, give up any hopes for socializing, and become a serious, responsible man. This, unfortunately, proves too much for Robert to handle. The pressures of parenthood are great, and everyone, as Phillip Martin has proven, is not ready to accept the burden of a "family," particularly not an eight year old child. When Robert, as the years pass, cannot provide the essential life-giving needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, he grows to despise the memory of his father. It is the incident involving the rape of his sister wherein he fails to provide protection that pushes him to hate himself.

In essence, he views himself as worthless. His younger brother avenges the rape of his sister by killing the man responsible. It is during X's moment of weakness—his moment of indecisiveness—that his younger brother assumes the role of "man" that was supposed to be Robert's to occupy. He remembers the incident, stating:

Instead of me taking the gun like I shoulda done, I took her in my arms and called on God. Viciously raped, her young body torn and bloody—and I sat there rocking her in my
arms, crying, and calling on God... My brother brought the gun to me ... Pushed it on me three times. Go kill that dog... But all I did was sit there holding my sister and crying. So he did it for me. He found the man, shooting pool, and blew his brains out...

(103)

At that point in his life, Robert did not react because he, who had worked so hard to be the "man," realized that he had failed. This failure leaves him momentarily paralyzed. He knew, as his mind wandered during that period of indecision, that if his father had been there, then his mother would never have been involved with another man and, thus, there would never have been a rape. He informs his father that "Every day of my life I regret I didn't kill him myself. Every day of my life since that day. Every day" (103). Robert hates the fact that he did not do the "manly" thing as his brother did. He tells his father that murder was the only alternative because in White America "By law she wasn't even raped. Black girls don't get raped, black girls entice their rapist" (103). Subsequently, his brother goes to jail, and upon his release he becomes the "man" because he has gained the respect of the women in the house; when they needed a man most, the younger brother stepped forward, without hesitation, without question. By killing the rapist, the brother:

... was the man, and he let Etienne know it. When he pulled the trigger, then he was the man. His sister, the way she looked at him, let him know that he was the man. Even
Johanna. Even Etienne himself let him know that he was the man now. (198)

The younger brother views Robert X as a failure—as one who does not deserve the respect of a man. The brother, along with his sister, eventually leaves his mother's house, and, according to friends of the family, they have not been heard from in six years. Robert X knows that after his father left, his brother and sister looked upon him as the paternal figure, the one whose duties included providing the necessities described by Madhubuti. When he is unable to fulfill his role as the "man," his family is destroyed beyond repair. Psychologically, this quest for manhood, which Robert X seeks, has been an elusive one, for, as Robert Staples suggests,

> For centuries the Black man had before him one image of true manhood. So uptight have Americans been about clearly defining 'man' as the chief provider and decision maker in the family, complete with a wife as housewife, that the Black man could scarcely have escaped an insidious comparison of himself with the White man. As he assessed himself and saw himself in the eyes of the White male, he forgot the heroism of the past, his own valiant efforts to gain freedom, his invincibility in troubled times, and began to know himself wrongly. He knew frustration and failure as no other men in history have known. (Staples 68)

This frustration consumes Robert X as it did his father. By the time he arrives in St. Adrienne, with a non-attainable sense of manhood, he is extremely dependent upon alcohol, using it to escape his troubled
existence. He is described by Chippo, a family friend, as being "... the one crazy" (Gaines 186). His room is described as a "crypt" because it is there that his lifeless body lay--day after day--night after night. He hates himself because he believes he has failed his mother, who expected him to, as Chippo describes:

...work, help bring money in the house. He was the man of the house. The man of the house. She told it to him that day he left from here ... she told him that till you [Phillip] did come back to them he was going to be the man of the house. She took him by the hand, looking straight into his face--a scared, confused little boy. I told her then it wasn’t right. I told her there’d be other men, and she oughtn’t force this burden on him. But she didn’t here a word I said. (194)

This failure, as Robert X perceives it, is his father’s fault. The fact that Phillip Martin could not deal with the responsibilities of parenthood led him to abandon his family. As a direct result, Robert X is forced to assume a role he is not mentally equipped to handle. He is never allowed to be a child because he is forced to assume the position of provider and protector--a position which his father left unfilled--one which Robert X, a child without paternal guidance, cannot fill.

Robert X’s inability to cultivate his sense of manhood results in his suicide. Realizing that he can no longer cope, and seeing that his reunion with his father affords him no assurances concerning his plight as a Black man in America, Robert X drowns himself in the Big
Man Bayou. Ronald Taylor's description of one's failure to deal with these pressures accurately describes Robert X:

Anxiety about failure to achieve may result in compensatory behaviors designed to show outward conformity to the role. Compensatory behaviors involve risk taking of various kinds which may lead to accidents, exhibition of violence, excessive consumption of alcohol and smoking. Reciprocally, anxiety about failure to achieve male role requisites may result in denial of self. (147)

These forces often result, as with Robert X, in "... an impairment of [the Black males'] capacities for effective role enactment as a result of their stigmatized status" (147). What Robert X is unable to understand is the fact that circumstances, beyond his control, are what has caused these feelings of failure. His father, Phillip Martin, is, unfortunately, unable to reach him. Phillip, who is much wiser to the suppressive forces in America, is trying to make his son realize that society prevented him from being a man. Phillip believes that he was unable to attain a job, find adequate housing, and even, at times, food for his family because, in White America, the Black man is, if not adequately prepared, destined to fail. What Phillip fails to understand is that his failure to cope in society, to provide guidance by example, is what has had such a grievous effect on Robert. Unfortunately, Robert is never able to recover from his resentment or his hatred of both his father and
himself, and, thus, his life ends as tragically as it was lived.
CHAPTER 4

JEFFERSON:

THE SELF-IMAGE OF A HOG

This theme of the socially-overwhelmed Black male is repeated in Gaines’ latest novel, A Lesson Before Dying (1993). This novel centers around Jefferson, a despondent Black male who is victimized by his racist environment. Jefferson is a reluctant party in a shoot-out in a liquor store in which the three other men involved are killed, including the White store owner. As the only survivor, he is accused of murder and sentenced to death. As in the aforementioned novels, there is an older, more experienced Black male, who tries to assist the younger, troubled, Black male. Grant Wiggins, who left his small rural Black community to attend the university, has returned to the plantation school to teach children whose lives promise to be as unsuccessful as Jefferson’s. He is grappling with his own problems regarding racism when his aunt and Jefferson’s grandmother persuade him to "impart something of himself, of his learning and pride, to Jefferson before his death --to prove the lawyer wrong" (Gaines’ Preface). It is because Grant is a proud man that he left to go away to school where he learned that Blacks can be more than just maids and fatherless criminals; it is this same sense of
pride that serves, upon returning to his place of birth, as the source of Grant's frustration in dealing with the racially-suppressive South. Even Grant recognizes that someone must be punished for the crime, and that placing the blame on Jefferson is convenient for this White power structure because they neither respect him as a man nor as a human being.

The extreme ramification of Jefferson's loss of self becomes evident when the defense attorney calls him a "hog," which the latter argues, is not even worthy of death. This comment is meant to demoralize Jefferson and, at the same time, hopefully minimize the severity of capital punishment to the jury. Said differently, the defense attorney is attempting to appeal to the morality of the jury who might, in his eyes, take pity on the actions of a mindless beast, rather than that of a responsible Black male who just happened be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Often, for men like Jefferson, social forces conspire to impair effective role enactment and coherent identity among Black males (141). For Jefferson, this means society, since the day he was born, has conspired to dispose of him. The community in which he has been raised is geared toward discouraging the development of Black males. It is because, throughout his whole life, he has been told that he is nothing, less than nothing, that Jefferson, without argument, accepts
the subordinate position of a hog. When his attorney refers to him as being less than human, Jefferson begins to act as if he too deserves to be executed, stating:

That's for youmans, he said. I ain't no youman... Hogs don't give nothing. Hogs don't leave nothing... old hog don't care... Hogs don't worry. Hogs just know ... This hog know. Fattening up for Christmas. Kill him at Christmastime. (Gaines 139 - 140)

Furthermore, Jefferson is extremely bitter. He knows that the crime which he committed is not deserving of the punishment he receives. He experiences self-hatred and, by acting like a hog, Jefferson is experiencing a mental disorder regarding his identity. This disorder is best described by Adelbert H. Jenkins in *The Psychology of the Afro-American* (1982):

... when a person's individual history has been troubled and/or when the weight of events becomes to crushing he may develop clear psychological symptomatology; that is, the person becomes psychologically disordered. Then some of the things that the person ordinarily keeps out of the way come to the surface psychologically. Thus, to the extent that the psychological symptomatology of those black persons who become mentally disordered has admixtures of damaged narcissism, these may be exacerbated by racial pressures. (Jenkins 156)

This means that Jefferson, as a direct result of the racial pressures which, over the years, he has been subjected to, suffers from severe psychological trauma--trauma which builds over a period of time, until finally, when told that he is not even worthy of death because he is less than human, he snaps. This disorder allows
Jefferson the opportunity to concede defeat because he now believes "I be glad when it's over... old hog get him some rest then" (140). Relinquishing his humanity is the coping mechanism which Jefferson utilizes in preparation for death. In his mind, Jefferson no longer exists--only an animal worthy of slaughter remains.

William H. Grier and Cobbs M. Price suggest that:

For the Black man in this country, it is not so much a matter of acquiring manhood as it is a struggle to feel it his own. Whereas the white man regards his manhood as an ordained right, the black man is engaged in a never ending battle for its possession. For the black man, attaining any portion of manhood is an active process. He must penetrate barriers and overcome opposition in order to assume a masculine posture. (Grier and Price 59)

Jefferson can no longer continue this active process. Instead, he chooses to discontinue the struggle toward acquiring manhood. He is

Brutal and brutalized, lost forever to his unexpended hatred and his fear of the world, a numbed and illiterate black boy stumbling into a murder and never, not even at the edge of the electric chair, breaking through to an understanding of either his plight or himself. (Howe 64)

His self image is that of a mindless beast and, as Grier and Cobb state: "In time he comes to see that society has locked arms against him, that rather than help he can expect opposition to his development, and that he lives not in a benign community but in a society that views his growth with hostility" (Grier and Price 59). Jefferson
believes he will never become a man because his obstacle, his sentence of death, is the end. So he abandons his humanity, his maturation process, his sense of self, and retreats; he accepts the label of "hog" as accurate.

In retrospect, Jefferson’s path, which eventually leads to imprisonment and a sentence of death, was foreordained for a number of reasons. First, as with both Marcus and Robert X, the lack of paternal guidance has impaired his ability to function in White America. Jefferson never had a chance to learn the meaning of manhood because there was no one to show him. There were, certainly, males in the community, but there was no one to help nurture and develop Jefferson’s own sense of maleness. Jefferson’s attorney uses, as his defense, the fact that Jefferson has failed to mature into manhood while addressing the jury:

Gentleman of the jury, look at this--this--this boy. I almost said man, but I can’t say man. Oh, sure, he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this--this--this a man? No, not I. I would call it a boy and a fool. A fool is not aware of right and wrong. A fool does what others tell him to do ... A man with a modicum of intelligence would have seen that those racketeers meant no good. (Gaines 7)

Because he had no father, no male figure to emulate, Jefferson grew up without a true sense of self, without a real understanding of what it takes to be a Black man in America. He had no one to teach him how to overcome
the trials and tribulations that Whites inflict upon
Black men daily. All he had was his grandmother, who
did the best she could, for guidance.

Similar to the character Miss Julie in *Of Love and
Dust* (1967), there is Jefferson's "Nannan," Miss
Emma—a strong Black woman seeking out the assistance
of an older Black male who, hopefully, can impart some
final wisdom to her doomed grandson. As was the case
with Miss Julie, Miss Emma uses all of her resources,
in both the Black community (requesting Grant’s
assistance), and in the White (requesting that her
former employer, Mr. Henri, use his influence with the
sheriff so that Grant can visit Marcus). She is
willing to relinquish her dignity so that Grant can
assist Jefferson, stating "Mr. Henri? ... I’ll be up
here again tomorrow, Mr. Henri. I’ll be on my knees
next time you see me, Mr. Henri" (23). Miss Emma, as
Miss Julie had become with Marcus, is getting too old
to watch over Jefferson. So she seeks the aid of a
reluctant Grant Wiggins because, as she states "I don’t
want them to kill no hog, ... I want a man to go to
that chair, on his own two feet" (13). She knows that
Jefferson is going to die. She simply wants him to die
with a sense of dignity. Jefferson is a direct
reflection upon the woman who raised him, and as Miss
Emma states passionately, "I didn’t raise no hog, and I
don't want no hog to go set in that chair... " (20).
Miss Emma also knows that the same system that referred to Jefferson as a hog, that sentenced an innocent Black male to die in the electric chair, is the same system that hampered his maturation.

The Whites in power, Mr. Henri, the Sheriff, the court system, all, over the years, have conspired to keep the Black male in a subordinate position in Louisiana. None of these White men, at any point, believe that Jefferson could be innocent. They all believe that, simply because Jefferson is Black, he, without a doubt, committed the crime for which he is accused. When Blacks come to the home of Mr. Henri, they are expected to enter through the rear and wait to be acknowledged. Black people, both in and outside of Mr. Henri's home are treated with no respect; in his eyes, as well as in the eyes of the White Southern community, Black people are all considered to be equal in class status—the status of servants. For Mr. Henri, and the majority of the White characters in the novel, Jefferson, and young Black males like him, is getting exactly what he deserves. This same White society has no use for men like Grant Wiggins either. While standing in Mr. Henri's living room, Grant, observing the Whites in the room, thinks "I was too educated for Henri Pichot; he had no use for me at all any more" (21). Grant knows that he has defied the
suppressive intentions of White society and, by becoming educated, he has become a threat to the community; White men like Mr. Henri are afraid that Black men like Grant might inspire other Black males in the community to question White authority, that he might upset the status of the "happy negroes" in the community. It is the oppression that Whites in power, like Mr. Henri, inflict upon the Black males in the community that prevents young men, like Jefferson, from discovering a true sense of self. Instead, when faced with arduous obstacles, these young Black males do not question authority, they do not fight, they do as Jefferson has done--they abandon their humanity and quit.

Even though Jefferson has decided to quit, Grant Wiggins, who acts as a mirror character, continues to struggle as both an educator and a man. He is a man who is not destined from within, psychologically, to fail, but, nonetheless, is pushed toward failure from outside forces. Grant understands that it is his community and the people, both White and Black, who constrict Black males from becoming Black men. When he reflects on the teacher of his youth, he remembers how professor Matthew Antoine attempted to impose his own hatred upon his students--a hatred which often leads to a psychological impairment similar to Jeffersons:

He had told us that most of us would die violently, and those who did not would be
brought down to the level of beast. Told us that there was no other choice but to run and run. That he was living testimony of someone who should have run. That in him—he did not say all this, but we felt it—there was nothing but hatred for himself and contempt for us. (Gaines 63)

Grant attempts to escape these societal impositions by leaving his community to go to school. Upon returning, he sees that nothing has changed regarding racial oppression, and he views his aunt’s wish for him to assist Jefferson—to which he strenuously objects—as forcing him to concede unto the White man the manhood he ran so far away to achieve. In other words, because Grant has to ask the White power structure, which consists of the sheriff and his aunt’s former employer Mr. Henri, permission to visit Jefferson, he is forced to acknowledge that he is not considered a man in this community, but a "nigger," who, despite his education, receives no more respect than any other Black servant. He expresses his disdain for this acknowledgement, which he believes is his aunt’s fault, when he states:

Everything you sent me to school for, you’re stripping me of it ... The humiliation I had to go through, going into that man’s kitchen. The hours I had to wait while they ate and drank and socialized before they would even see me. Now going up to jail ... To search my body each time as if I’m some kind of criminal. ... Anything to humiliate me. All the things you wanted me to escape by going to school. Years ago, Professor Antoine told me that if I stayed here, they were going to break me down to the nigger I was born to be. But he didn’t tell me that my aunt would help them do it. (79)
Grant is experiencing what many Black men must inevitably face—that throughout the life of a Black male, especially in a racist environment, he is told to hold back, to constrict, to subvert and camouflage his masculinity. Black male assertiveness becomes a forbidden fruit in oppressive White communities, and if it is attained it must be savored privately (Grier and Cobb 59). Thus, educated Black men, who appear to have a strong sense of self, cannot openly display their skill, their talent, for if they do they are considered trouble makers, revolutionaries, and leaders. And, as White America has proven, time and again, Black men like these are a threat and must be exterminated.

Often, this suppression of Black masculinity begins at school. According to Whitney M. Young Jr., frustrated idealists—Black men who, after receiving an education, become even more cynical about the state of Black males in America—make poor guardians of a nation’s youth (Young 134). Grant Wiggins is becoming pessimistic, as was his childhood professor, regarding the role of education. He believes that because he cannot adequately provide physical necessities, such as books and a blackboard, and, often, the inspiration which helps to motivate children, his students, who so desperately need assistance, will end up victims of his inability—they
will end up like his teacher prophesied--like Jefferson.

Young states,

America's educational system was invented not only to provide people with the skills needed by our society but also to transmit to young people society's values and beliefs. If we accept the fact that racism is one of our most cherished values, then the schools have succeeded admirably, for they, more than any other institution, have perpetuated racism and destroyed countless black children in the process. (Young 135)

Historically, Black schools, like Grant's, lack the facilities needed to teach Black children useful skills in today's technological world. Whites, like the school superintendent, Dr. Joseph, often appear, as Grant observes, to be little more than slave masters. Grant says,

Dr. Joseph would call on someone who looked half bright, then he would call on someone he felt was the opposite ... And besides looking at hands, now he began inspecting teeth. Open wide, say ahh--and he would have the poor children spreading out their lips as far as they could while he peered into their mouths. At the university I had read about slave masters who had done the same when buying new slaves... At least Dr. Joseph had graduated to the level where he let the children spread out their own lips, rather than using some kind of crude metal instrument. I appreciated his humanitarianism. (56)

Dr. Joseph's seeming concern for hygiene as opposed to education reaffirms Grant's belief that "It doesn't matter anymore... Just do the best you can. But it won't matter" (66). Grant has convinced himself, as Jim Kelley does in Of Love and Dust (1967), that no
manner how hard one tries, society gears the Black male toward failure. Both Grant Wiggins and Jim Kelley believe that fighting against the oppressive norms in their Southern communities is hopeless and futile; they believe that they cannot win, so they do not even try. Yet, Grant is afraid the school children will become deviant—illiterate criminals whose fate will be similar to Jefferson’s. Eventually, this is why Grant, who at first was completely apathetic, attempts to assist Jefferson. He is hoping that maybe he can find an answer that, hopefully, will save the next generation of Jeffersons.

By visiting the prison, Grant is attempting to help Jefferson deal with his depression by assuring him that his life, no matter how short it may be, has meaning. Depression, according to Jenkins, is derived from the experience of feeling in some ways unwanted and unacceptable (Jenkins 156). Grant recognizes that, for Jefferson, racism has perpetrated a psychological assault on the latter’s sense of self. This means that the racist environment that Jefferson has lived in, his entire life, has damaged his mind. Jefferson has always been told, as is the case with many Black males in America, that he will never amount to anything and, furthermore, that he should not even try. The fact that Jefferson has never had any positive motivation,
no proper guidance in dealing with his sense of maleness, prevents him from being able to deal, psychologically, with the forces which impair his maturation. Knowing this, Grant attempts to inspire Jefferson to excel toward manhood. He informs Jefferson that he does matter—that he can become

A hero...who does something for other people. He does something that other men don’t and can’t do...I could never be a hero...A hero does for others. He would do anything for the people he loves, because he knows it would make their lives better... You could give something... to those children in the quarter... The white people out there are saying that you don’t have it—that you’re a hog, not a man. But I know they are wrong. You have the potentials. We all have, no matter who we are. (Gaines 191)

Grant goes so far as to try to convince Jefferson that he can destroy the myths which Whites have regarding Black men—myths which suggest that Black men are all criminals, animalistic, sexually deviant, unintelligent, and willing to accept any type of oppression that White society inflicts. Grant tells Jefferson that Whites do not respect Blacks, and that

The last thing they ever want is to see a black man think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth. They would no longer have justification for having us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in. As long as none of us stand, they’re safe. They’re safe with me. They’re safe with Reverend Ambrose. I don’t want them to feel safe with you anymore. (192)

By standing up—by asserting his manhood to his oppressors—Jefferson will be able to call them liars,
and "... show them that [he is] as much a man--more a man than they can ever be" (192). By "standing-up," Jefferson will receive, according to Grant, the respect that no other Black man in their community has; he will destroy White America's myths about Black men, and, subsequently, show strength and courage for Grant, as well as his students, who, possibly, might use Jefferson as a role model. Additionally, Jefferson's "Nannan," Miss Emma, will find comfort in the knowledge that Jefferson will die a man. But, in order to be a man, Jefferson must understand that

They play by the rules their forefathers created hundreds of years ago. [White America's] forefathers said that were only three-fifths human--and they believe it to this day. Sheriff Guidry does too. He calls me Professor, but he doesn't mean it. He calls Reverend Ambrose Reverend, but he doesn't respect him. When I showed him the notebook and pencil I brought you, he grinned. Do you know why? He believes it was just a waste of time and money. What can a hog do with a pencil and paper. (192)

Furthermore, Grant wants Jefferson to understand that he can be "...bigger than anyone he [has] ever met" (193). He tells Jefferson "But you can be better. Because we need you to be. Me, your godmother, the children, and all the rest of them in the quarter" (193). Grant hopes that if Jefferson realizes, even if just before his final moments, that he is not an animal but a human who can inspire a community by asserting his manhood, then maybe he will be able to die a man. As
Grant watches Jefferson cry, he concludes this to mean that "[Jefferson] cr[ies], not from reaching any conclusion by reasoning, but, because, lowly as [Jefferson is], [he is] still part of the whole" (194). Grant's final lesson is to give Jefferson a pencil and a notebook, an act which Gaines uses to show how Black males can often cope through expression. As the weeks pass, Grant finally seems to reach Jefferson, and, when Grant visits the prison, Jefferson's demeanor, his posture is different. No longer is he making animal sounds. No longer does his head hang low. No longer is he on his hands and knees. He is developing, understanding, maturing—he is becoming a man. Jefferson's decision to write demonstrates that he does, indeed, contrary to what the Whites in society believe, have a voice. Upon requesting to see the notebook, Grant reads: "If I ain't nothing but a hog, how come they just don't knock me in the head like a hog? Stab me in the head like a hog? ... Man walk on two feet; hogs on four hoofs" (220). After reading this, Grant is elated. He knows that, now, Jefferson sees himself differently than his oppressors see him, and that he is questioning these impositions, which include his imprisonment and the suppressive mentality of the White community placed upon him. Now, Jefferson can even show love and appreciation toward his "nanan"—an act he performs simply by eating
her gumbo. Earl E. Baughman suggests in *Black Americans* (1971), that Black males, who are oppressed by Whites, often demonstrate a capacity for displacement, by acting cruel and inhumane towards loved ones (Baughman 8). This is exactly what Jefferson does, but, with Grant's help, he is able to return the kindness and concern which he receives from others. Before his execution, Jefferson displays the fortitude he needs to enable him to die with dignity. Jefferson, with Grant's help, has discovered that he does not have to accept the negative images which Whites in power have attempted to impose upon his psyche. He is a man. No matter what White America calls him, no matter how disempowered he felt in the past, he is now ready to die a man. After Jefferson's death, Grant reads his diary, his final lesson, and is amazed at the transformation which Jefferson has undergone regarding his sense of self. He writes:

...you say i aint gone deep in me you say jus say whats on my mind so one day you can be save an you can save the chiren...i kno i care for nanan...the lord kno mr wigin i hope i can see her one mo time on this earth fore i go is that love mr wigin when you want to see sombody bad bad...The shef an mr Dicho and mr mogan come in the cell today...i seen mr picho look up at shef quiry an mr morgan an the shef look back at him but mr mogan never stop lookin at me like he was trying to figer me ... i seen nanan at the table...i tol her i was strong... (233)

In the end, as Grant cries for the first time in the school yard, his heart is filled with misery.
Realistically, Grant knows that as long as he remains in this oppressive Southern community, as long as those in power show an utter disdain for Black men, he will never attain a sense of personal enrichment. If Grant remains in the town, he knows he will have to watch another Black man, maybe one of his own students, crushed under the weight of oppressive forces—forces which, as was the case with Jefferson, the young Black male may not be prepared to combat. Like Frederick Douglass and Ralph Ellison’s protagonist in *Invisible Man* (1952), Grant understands that freedom and fulfillment for a Black man in America depend[s] on the recovery of his cultural antecedents and the assertion of his individual identity against those forces that would deny him either one (Andrews 67).

He views Jefferson’s death as a senseless waste of life, but he is also pleased that Jefferson dies a man. Jefferson’s final statements attest to his strength and to the fact that he has learned his lesson:

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i been shakin an shakin but im gon stay strong... when i was a little boy i was a waterboy an rode the cart but now i got to be a man an set in a cher...day breaking sun coming up the bird in the tre sou like a blu bird sky blu blu mr wigin good by mr wigin tell them im a man good by mr wigin ... (234).
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Similarly, in Claude McKay’s *Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (1953), he delineates, with vivid depictions of White oppressors, how the emasculated Black male in America, like Jefferson, should die. The poem "If We
"Must Die" is exactly the lesson that Grant has conveyed to Jefferson. It reads:

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,
So that our precious blood may not be shed In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us through the dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (Mckay 372-373)

In the end, this is exactly how Jefferson dies. His life cannot be saved, but his dignity, his sense of pride has been motivated so much that, even in death, he can hold his head up high, "dying, but fighting back."
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

In all three novels, Gaines allows the reader to see how the lives of his male characters are shaped psychologically by social conditions. Early on in the lives of young Black males, there is an awareness of the low evaluation others place on dark skin, due to the fact that American society is a culture where White skin, superiority, and success are synonymous. These young Black males are excluded from broad avenues of American culture, and, thus, have problems achieving an understanding regarding status and identity. Self hatred, frustration, and hopelessness are some of the defenses which Black males utilize when faced with hostile pressures which emanate from the larger community. As a result of this, young Black males feel insecure and, often, lack self confidence. According to Austin, Fenderson, and Nelson in The Black Man and the Promise of America (1970), because the Black man inherits despair, he does not possess a whole personality (Austin, Fenderson, and Nelson 231). They go on to suggest, regarding these Black men, that:

In the acts of distrust and hostility directed toward whites as well as other Negroes, he frequently reveals a self-hatred which grows out of the unstable foundation that white society made him forge from his reactions to segregation and discrimination. The years of
unemployment, inferior education, inadequate housing, and poor health have produced a sense of futility and failure. It is this part of the Negro heritage in the United States that is so acutely felt among Negro men on whom much of the ego-destroying weight has fallen. (232)

There are several coping mechanisms which Gaines' characters use throughout the novels. Unfortunately, as a direct result of the societal impositions discussed, none of Gaines' young Black male character survives. It does not appear that Gaines is suggesting that these impositions provide a hopeless predicament for Black males. He demonstrates through Jefferson that often, even in situations which are irrevocable, Black men can die with dignity and a true sense of self. With a few telling exceptions, these Black males are, as George Stade describes, "Brutal in the flesh because they are impoverished of spirit. They are pitiless when they are not self-pitying" (Stade 265). Gaines is also informing the reader that if these problems regarding identity and self worth are not addressed in the Black community, the preceding generations will suffer similar fates. By addressing these issues which Black males face, Gaines is indeed offering a solution. If nothing else, Gaines' novels may serve as a resource which might possibly provide a variable for understanding the despondent behavior of Black men in American society. The fact that this imposed psychological trauma is a problem which
literary scholars often overlook, at least to the extent which Gaines addresses it, shows the need for more literature regarding the topic. Most Black men do cope successfully in environments similar to Gaines' characters. Unfortunately, too many Black men, like Marcus, Robert X, and Jefferson, do not.
Works Cited


