

A gathering of old men



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Ernest J. Gaines' novel, "A Gathering of Old Men" employs experimental narrative techniques in order to probe themes of racism and classicism, as well as to examine the nature of storytelling in humanity's past and also for humanity's future.

By employing no less than fifteen separate narrators in this novel, Gaines is able to penetrate deeply into the subjective experiences of a number of men -- together whom comprise a social microcosm of African American history and experience.

Through the diverse range of voices at his disposal, Gaines probes a wide range of grievances and also exaltations among his characters and demonstrates the strength of communal unity. The diverse range of narrators used in the novel expresses the novel's theme of strength-through-diversity and unity-through-intimacy.

A careful reading of the novel reveals the deep motivations of its characters, each of which reveals the novel's theme of redemption and social renewal. Because of the "tribal" nature of the diversity of narrators, the reader is able to feel as though they are a direct participant in the action, as though reading the novel is an initiation rite of sorts.

The novel's central intrigue: the murder of Beau Baton, also forwards the initiation or ritualistic theme: the novel is meant to show the growth (or initiation) not only of chronologically grown men into -- long delayed -- manhood, but to redefine standards of black masculinity altogether for the characters in the novel itself and also for the novel's readers.

In the novel, the fifteen separate narrators are drawn out of their ordinary lives and into a civic, almost mythic role. Gaines signals that the unfolding of events is meant to have this mythic, ritualistic overtone when the old men gathering proclaim that things seem new again, that they feel good about what they are doing.

Wallace sees the water of the river "as if it were still a mystery," while Mat admits that he is happy that they "and all the rest are doing something different, for the first time" (Gathering, 40).

There is also the symbolic/ritualistic firing of guns, urged by Clattoo who tells the men "Let them down there hear you" (Gathering, 48) and contrasted with the brutality of combined experience among the novel's protagonists, this symbolic gunfire demonstrates controlled violence and anger: emotions turned to ritualistic healing.

There can be no doubt that these feelings of race-based anger contributed to the murder. When asked, Uncle Billy admits that he killed Beau out of a longing for revenge:

What they did my boy.... The way they beat him. They beat him till they beat him crazy and we had to send him to Jackson (the state mental facility). He don't even know me and his mama no more. We take him candy, we take him cake, he eat it like a hog eating corn....

The ritual-based and initiation based theme of the novel is meant to transform the violence of the murder into a healing process, where each of the novel's narrators "confesses" their anger and need for revenge and then

each learns something through the experience of participating after-the-fact in a murder that only a single man committed.

Later, for example, Gable reveals his son is killed for the false accusation for rape on a white woman and Coot talks about his war experiences.

The man who could break horses, Yank, relishes his role without at first realizing it makes him subservient to whites. But there is also a shadow of environmental awareness tied to the ritual murder: that the renewal of black masculinity is directly tied to the renewal of nature.

Johnny Paul explains the murder on behalf of the flowers: " That's why I kilt him, that's why....

To protect them little flowers. But they ain't here no more. And how come?" (Gathering, 92). Gaines' intention is to tie subjective individual renewal with the renewal of both community and environment and he portrays the murder and consequent ruse in symbolically charged terms.

Killing Beau might revive the river: " That river.... Where the people went all these years. Where they fished, where they washed they clothes, where they was baptized. St. Charles River. Done gived us food, done cleaned us clothes, done cleaned us soul. St. Charles River -- no more, though. No more.

They took it. " (Gathering, 107). Because the novel relies on complex themes, it is dangerous to assume that racial issues are any more dominant than issues of community preservation and environmental preservation.

The key theme in the novel, as mentioned, is the reviving of masculinity: the renewal of masculine energy which is seen to extend beyond race and into the elements of the earth and nature themselves.

Mathu's discovery of his community is the most starkly profoundly as portrayed in "A Gathering of Old Men." When he says "I been changed.... I been changed. Not by that white man's God. I don't believe in that white man's God. I been changed by y'all.

Rooster, Clabber, Dirty Red, Coot -- you changed this hardhearted old man." (Gathering, 182); he is admitting that even his previous contempt and mistrust of white people has been challenged by his new-found notions of community.

While it is relatively easy to spot the racial themes of "A Gathering of Old Men" the communal themes and the themes of renewal through nature may be a bit more difficult for the casual reader to understand.

When the various themes of the novel are begun to be regarded as a whole, the picture which emerges is not a picture of "black" anger of African American bitterness or even of racism or classicism, but issues of humanism.

The reclaiming of masculinity by the men in the novel can be regarded, symbolically, as the renewal of any person or any group which seeks to finally reaffirm its power after a period, perhaps even a protracted period, of suppression and duress.

Rather than portray this accumulated anger and resentment as exploding in, say, a violent -- if even localized -- revolution, Gaines views the kind of fusion of bitterness, anger, and resentment, to a call to awareness of and an identification and re-claiming of communal ties and environmental awareness.

Taken this way, the subjective stories presented by the various narrators of "A Gathering of Old Men" can be seen to transform into universal voices of awareness, and cathartic change.

This transformation is heralded by community and the liberation of private anger and private experience as culturally accepted, in fact culturally imperative information.

The novel's experimental narrative techniques weld the ancient oral tradition of tribal cultures with the scathingly sharp awareness of modern political and psychological realities.