

A gathering of old men: importance of standing up for oneself

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ If you fell down yesterday, stand up today”. This quote by H. G. Wells is seen in the novel *A Gathering of Old Men*. The novel, taking place in the 1970s, was in a time in which African-Americans still suffered heavy discrimination. After years of taking this abuse, when an incident comes in which a white man lays dead at the hands of a black man, which would eventually call for a lynching, the discriminated unite. They show that despite their tortured past, they still possess their bravery, power, and pride.

This dramatic novel by Ernest J. Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men*, written in a critical tone employs the use of characterization, flashbacks, and symbolism to express the theme that there comes a time one must stand up for him or herself. In the book, a character named Mathu is one who does not falter in up keeping his pride. From the very beginning, he never let anyone insult him because of his African-American heritage. He always stands up for himself, even facing a white man, and never faltered, even when he was sent to jail.

Because of this attitude, Mathu was respected even by some white men like Mapes who “ knowed Mathu had never backed down from anybody, either. Maybe that’s why he liked him” (Gaines 84). Mathu was like a strong rock, the attempts of others at making him submit were but pebbles against his overpowering pride and dignity. A character that Mathu attempted to instill some lessons on becoming a man was Charlie. Charlie, despite his mild character was a large man towering at 6feet 7inches and weighing 275 pounds.

Beau Boutan, Charlie's boss and some others often ridiculed him with names like " Big Charlie" and " nigger boy" because of his mild character (Gaines 187). Charlie however, after observing Mathu's strong pride and refusal to let anyone step over that pride, eventually gained some courage to stand up for himself. After he killed Beau and ran away, he came back and was ready to atone for his deed. Gaines used this event in the novel to show that even though people might be insulted and beat down, they can still gain enough courage to stand up for themselves.

When Charlie did stand up for himself, and became, in his eyes, a man, that eventually led to his death. Gaines's killing off of Charlie after he started standing up for himself was alluding to the idea that when people make a stand, they must be careful not to overdo it, like Charlie did, or there might be unfavorable results. Another character of interest is Candy. Candy is the owner of the place in which all the men gather, and the organizer of the gathering. At first, Candy seems to be genuinely worried about the people in Marshall, saying "'No I won't let them harm my people'... ' I will protect my people.'" (Gaines 19).

However, as the story progresses Gaines shows that Candy's motives may not have been as good-natured as firstly suggested. It's eventually revealed she does not care much for the other men gathered in Mathu's yard, but only for Mathu himself. While she showed little emotion when the other men were called up to Maps and hit, she was quick to react when Mathu was called. Gaines also showed Candy's true nature in the event when Clatoo wanted to talk to the men inside Mathu's house, without Candy.

At this point, Candy threatened to have all the men who followed Clatoo kicked out of the Marshall place, their only home. Gaines portrayed Candy in this way to show in this time, the idea of oppressing people still existed in the minds of even those who seemed good-natured. Finally, Gaines creates a complex character out of Mapes. Mapes is a character who experiences a change during the story. When he first arrives at the site of Beau's death, and the gathering of the old men, he acts with the same mindset of the Cajuns in that time.

His first response to the scene is violence. He attempts to gain information from the old men by hitting them. Eventually, when he realizes violence will produce no results, he lets them tell their stories. The prominent change in Mapes is shown at the time Luke Will and his crew arrive with the intent of hanging Beau's killer. Mapes attempts to protect Charlie and the rest of the men, saying "Go home, Luke Will" after Luke Will demanded he hands Charlie over to him (Gaines 195).

When Luke Will ignored Mapes and started a shoot out between his crew and the old men, Mapes resigned control of the situation to the old men and Charlie. Gaines used this to show that the mindset of people can change for the better. In the instance that Mapes trusted the old men and Charlie with the situation, he recognized them not as people of a lesser race, but respectable and trustable men, showing that old men's attempt at standing for themselves was able to change a man.

Gaines also employs the use of flashbacks in the novel. The main role the flashbacks play is to show the hardships and discrimination the African-Americans faced in that time. When Uncle Billy, one of the old men who
<https://assignbuster.com/a-gathering-of-old-men-importance-of-standing-up-for-oneself/>

gathered to finally stand up for himself after many years, was asked by Mapes the sheriff his reason for killing Beau, as all the old men claimed to have killed Beau, he recalled an event that happened years before. "What they did to my boy'... ' The way they beat him.

They beat him till they beat him crazy..." (Gaines 80). Gaines introduced this flashback to show the brutality suffered by the blacks at that time, and that it spared no one, not even a child. Another flashback was by Johnny Paul, who remembered back to a time when they had all lived as a community, till Beau and his tractor came to plow it all up. Johnny Paul was referring to this time when he confused Mapes by saying "But you still don't see. Yes, sir, what you see is the weeds, but you don't see what we don't see. '" (Gaines 89).

Johnny Paul was talking about how the weeds and rotting houses had replaced what was once a place of happiness, and brotherhood among the black families living there. Gaines uses this flashback to show what was taken from the African-Americans in the novel, to better explain their need to stand up for themselves. Tucker, one of the old men, goes into a flashback of his own. He remembers a time his brother and two mules, beat a white man and a tractor. The white man and his friends however said Tucker's brother had cheated, and beat him with canes.

Gaines adds this flashback to portray the obvious distinction between whites and blacks in that time. African-Americans were thought to be less of people than the Cajuns, so for this lesser person, Tucker's brother Silas, to beat the supposedly superior white man was unthinkable. Like Tucker said, "...and because he didn't lose like a nigger is supposed to lose, they beat him'" <https://assignbuster.com/a-gathering-of-old-men-importance-of-standing-up-for-oneself/>

(Gaines 97). In that situation a scared Tucker didn't stand up for his brother, and they beat him to his death.

Gaines uses this flashback to show the results of the old men being walked over by the Cajuns, and doing nothing about it. Gable also reminisces about his unfortunate past. He remembers the Cajuns sentencing his sixteen year old son to the electric chair, "on the word of a poor white trash" (Gaines 101). He remembers the indifference the Cajuns displayed in killing his son, watching his death, and leaving as though it was a "card game" (102). Through this flashback, Gaines shows again how the cruelty of the Cajuns didn't spare any ages.

He also shows how little the word of a black man counted over that of a white man or woman. When his son was being sent to electric chair, Gable couldn't do anything but beg the Cajuns. Gaines then ties this back to the importance of the men standing up to their tormentors, hinting such events could possibly have been avoided if they had stood up to their oppressors. Finally, Gaines utilizes symbolism in his novel to express the theme. Throughout the novel, a constant symbol that repeatedly came up was the tractor.

The tractor was what Beau Boutan was riding when he came after Charlie. The tractor was also what drove many of the African-Americans on the plantation out of work and away from their homes. Finally, the tractor was what the Cajun, Felix Boutan, rode when he was beat by Tucker's brother, Silas, which led to Silas being beat to death. The tractor symbolizes one of the main tortures of the African-American community in Marshall. It drove

them out of work, drove them out of their homes, and eventually led to their death, in the case of Charlie and Silas.

Gaines added the tractor and all it symbolized to be another motivator to the old men to make a stand. Another symbol was the shotguns that the old men had. The shotguns' empty shells in the beginning symbolized the weakness and ineffectiveness the old men had at the start of the story. In letting themselves to be walked over, and offering no resistance, they were as useless as the shotguns with empty shells they held in their hands. However, as the story progressed, when it came time to fight, the men had fully loaded shells and were ready for war.

This symbolizes the change they went through. From being old useless men with no impact, they were able to make a difference, and have an impact. By standing up for themselves, they displayed their power and pride, which eventually even affected Luke Will, who "looked worried, real worried" when he realized their conviction (Gaines 205). Concluding, with the use of characterization, flashbacks, and symbolism, Ernest J. Gaines expressed the theme that there comes a time one must stand up for him or herself throughout the book.

This theme was expressed through the characters Mathu, who always stood up for himself, Charlie, who learned to, and Candy and Mapes who were characters that were a motivator to the old men standing up for themselves. Gaines used the flashbacks to better portray the importance of the African-Americans in the area standing up for themselves, and he used symbolism to show one of the major torments of the people, and the change the old men went through. By standing up for themselves, the old men not only displayed

<https://assignbuster.com/a-gathering-of-old-men-importance-of-standing-up-for-oneself/>

their power and pride, but also seized hold of their future for themselves and their generations to come.