

# Manhood in a gathering of old men



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Manhood in A Gathering of Old Men In his novel, *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), Ernest J. Gaines writes about a Louisiana sugarcane plantation in the 1970s. The plantation's white, Cajun work boss is shot and seventeen old black men and one white woman each claim to be the killer. These old men have grown up in a time of extreme racism and have been victims of violence and discrimination. Growing up on the plantations, the black men have been seen as boys, instead of men their entire lives. Until now, they have been afraid to take a stand and establish their manhood in a society that has thought of them as subordinates. Each man recounts that at some point in his life, he was unable to stand up for himself or a loved one against unjust treatment by a white person. The white men and women feel that they are superior to African Americans, viewing them as their dependents because of their ownership of land and slave like possession over them. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines reveals that through the possession of land and people, white men were able to take the black man's sense of manhood. Gaines then proceeds by overturning this lack of manhood by reconstructing the view of masculinity for black males. The black males progress from being passive and immobilized by fear to taking action and taking up arms against whites. Gaines reveals the African American's deprivation of land and how whites have had a possessive notion about African Americans. Then Gaines uses these ideas to display how whites were able to take the black man's sense of manhood and how masculinity was changed for black men.

To begin, Gaines displays how for over a century, the whites have deprived African Americans of land. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Tucker, one of the old black men, discusses how African Americans have been deprived of land: “

After the plantation was dying out, the Marshalls doled out the land for sharecropping, giving the best land to the Cajuns, and giving us the worst—the bottom land near the swamps” (94). The Marshall family, a wealthy white family, owns the plantation Gaines focuses his novel on. Even after slavery, African Americans were given the worst land and had little hope for agricultural success. Although the Cajuns are seen as an inferior white class, they are still viewed as being of a higher class than African Americans. Without good land to farm, African Americans have been put in a position of inferiority, with no room to rise socially. Even with the end of slavery, Gaines wants the reader to realize that that African Americans are still at an extreme disadvantage compared to whites and their sense of manhood has suffered because of this.

Gaines also shows how whites have still had a slave like possession of African Americans. Candy Marshall, who owns part of the Marshall plantation, seems to be a friend of the African Americans on the property. She stands up for them when Beau Baton is killed and even claims responsibility for the death. However, she seems to want control over them and considers them part of her property. When talking to Mapes, the local sheriff, she exclaims, “I won’t let them touch my people” (17). Although Candy seems to have a good rapport with the African Americans living on the plantation, she considers them to be her property. Gaines purposely uses the wording of “my people” to show her possession of the African Americans on the plantation. Additionally, when the old black men ask to speak amongst themselves alone, Candy cries, “ Nobody’s talking without me...This is my place” and questions one of the old men, exclaiming, “ You know who you’re

talking to? Get the hell off my place” (173). When Candy is questioned by the black men, her attitude changes towards them and she becomes angry. She sees her property as being disobedient and her feeling of superiority over the black race takes over.

Another example of the possession of the African American race is seen through lynchings and murder. When talking to Mapes, Beulah expresses her anger about two boys killed years ago: “ Black people get lynched, get drowned, get shot, guts all hanging out—and here he come up with ain’t no proof of who did it. The proof was them two little children laying there in them two coffins” (108). Gaines is exhibiting how African Americans have been treated as property, even less than property, ever since slavery. They have been lynched and murdered as if they have no value. This view of African Americans reduced their manhood and instilled fear into their community. Through this possession of land and feeling of ownership of the black race, Gaines sets out to show how whites were able to take the black man’s sense of manhood. This lack of manhood lead to the old men being passive and immobilized by fear.

The black race has been seen as weak and unable to stand up for themselves. The black men on the plantation have been held down by the white owners and denied the ability to act as men. Their land and their own bodies have been seen as possession for the white race. Coot, a World War I veteran was not given the right to be considered a man for defending his country. He tells his story of how whites made him remove his uniform: “ I used to put on my old uniform and look at myself in the chifforobe glass. I knowed I couldn’t wear it outside, but I could wear it round the house...”

(104). Coot had served his country by fighting in World War I but was still not seen as a man in the eyes of whites and even his own eyes. Gaines shows how Coot looks at himself in the mirror and sees his lack of manhood.

Another example of the black men's deprivation of manhood is when Gable talks about how his son was killed in the electric chair for sleeping with a white woman. He explains, " And what did I do about them killing my boy like that? What could a poor old nigger do but go up to the white folks and fall down on his knees? Some went so far to say my boy shoulda been glad he died in the ' lectric chair ' stead at the end of a rope...And it was best we just forgot all about it and him" (102). Gable's son was killed for sleeping with a white woman and no one from the black community was able to stand up and do something to stop it. Years of feeling possessed and taken advantage of lead to passiveness by the African American race and the inability to act against the whites that held them down.

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the old men decide to find their manhood and rewrite the traditional view of the black man. Gaines wants to show the reader that African Americans can stand up for themselves and defy their aggressors despite the threat of violence against them. The black men decide to stand up against intimidation and violence from the white sheriff. The sheriff asks one of the black men, "'What were you doing when Candy called you?' I was right here. And I shot him.' Mapes' big face had turned redder with exasperation. He wanted to hit the old man again, maybe even choke him" (79). The black men are no longer afraid to stand up against a white man. They are fed up with their treatment and realize that it is time to act. The old men understand that there could be retaliation but know that

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standing up for themselves will be for the greater good. They find their manhood and change their passiveness to aggressiveness.

The old men take arms against the white men and rewrite their manhood by taking action and refusing to be passive. The white men doubt that the men have even loaded their guns, reinforcing the disrespect they have for African Americans and their manhood. Mathu, who was believed to have killed Beau, was one of the few black men who did not back down to authority in the community before the murder. Rufe explains Mapes' respect for Mathu, "Mapes was a lot of things. He was big, mean, brutal. But Mapes respected a man. Mathu was a man, and Mapes respected Mathu. But he didn't think much of the rest of us" (84). Gaines presents manhood as being respectable and without manhood, African Americans were not respected by whites. Throughout his life, Mathu teaches Charlie to stand up for himself as well. Charlie was always passive and scared until he has had enough. He explains, "That's all I ever done, all my life, was run from people...All my life made me do what they wanted me to do, and 'bused me if I did it right, and 'bused me if I did it wrong—all my life. And I took it" (188). Charlie was never able to take Mathu's advice until that day. He finally realizes and exclaims, "You tried to make me a man, didn't you, Parrain? Didn't you" (189). He realizes that, "I ain't Big Charlie, nigger boy, no more, I'm a man. Ya'll hear me? A man come back. Not no nigger boy. A nigger boy run and run and run. But a man come back. I'm a man" (187). Charlie returns to the scene of the crime to turn himself in. He is tired of running and letting whites hold African Americans down. Charlie discovers his manhood and is able to stand up to the whites that have suppressed him and his race for so long.

Gaines' reveals how through the possession of land and people, white people were able to take the manhood of African Americans. Along with taking their manhood, whites stripped African Americans of any social standing or respect. Gaines gives the characters a past of passiveness and immobilization caused by fear. However, Gaines then overturns the traditional view of black men as being passive and gives them a sense of manhood.