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This study examines religiosity in Ernest J. Gaines's fiction. Though some critics acknowledge the existence of religion in Gaines's work, most of them gloss over the topic. Generally, they conclude that the author mistrusts religion, religion fails the characters, and his preacher personas are perfunctory. I argue that such criticism fails to address fully the role of religion in Gaines's writing. Because of the ubiquitousness of religious circumstance, I argue that Gaines expresses neither rejection of nor ambivalence towards religion. Instead, I offer evidence that his stance is paradoxical. Characters who are atheists or claim to have lost faith are the characters who most epitomize Christian traditions and characteristics. Many use preacherly techniques such as speech and mannerisms, and others exemplify biblical characters through parallel lifestyles. Though several characters claim to reject religion, Christian principles impact and guide their behavior and thought. Additionally, Gaines inserts preacher personas whose words and actions seem to support the notion that the men are perfunctory; however, their roles as motivators and activists suggest otherwise. Gaines also acknowledges African American folk tradition with his insertion of folkloric preachers and conjurers. Though Gaines's primary themes are manhood issues, I argue that religion plays a role in creating and maintaining a sense of manhood. To analyze Gaines's treatment of religion, I discuss his use of four elements of narratology: the imagery of falling, rhetorical manipulation, the dismantling of stereotype, and the incorporation of biblical allusion and typological

symbolism and archetypes. My primary argument is that Ernest Gaines promotes orthodox Christianity by presenting it in an acceptable modern form. Utilizing a range of characters who exhibit varied attitudes toward religion, from unquestioning acceptance to outright rejection, Gaines “seemingly” advocates negative attitudes toward Christianity, but this exploitation of the negative repeatedly serves as a segue to reveal a positive update. Located in the background of each story is a positive historical or cultural factor related to religion, proving that religion is an escapable, fundamental aspect of African American culture.

“PRAY IF YOU WANT TO:” A REEVALUATION OF RELIGION
IN THE FICTION OF ERNEST J. GAINES

By

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To my family for your love, support, and most of all, patience.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the body of literature ranging from slavery to the Modern Period, African Americans' attitudes toward Christianity transition from acknowledgement of it as a viable source of support, comfort, and deliverance to rejection of it as a futile hold onto a tradition that offered little to no relief to blacks struggling against a tide of racism and discrimination. For example, in much slave literature, writers promote a blind adherence to God, who would fight His people's battles and deliver them from bondage. Later, abolitionist writers address God's rectitude and justice in regard to all races. During Reconstruction and its aftermath, acceptance of Christianity as a remedy for societal ills began to wane as whites further disenfranchised the Negro.¹ The harshest contemporary critique of Christianity in black writing occurred during the Renaissance and Reformation. The "white man's god" had become an ineffectual remedy for black suffering, such as lynchings, discrimination, segregation, unemployment, and extreme poverty. Much of Ernest Gaines's writing occurs during the Civil Rights period, which ushered in an intensified anti-Christianity fervor in literature. In the sociological study *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*, theologian Benjamin Mays contends that blacks' relationship with God is in direct correlation to their social situation. Mays's

¹ See W.E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903). In the chapter "Of the Faith of Our Fathers," DuBois contends that as the Negro's rights and ideals are trampled upon, "he often becomes bitter and vindictive; and his religion, instead of a worship, is a complaint and a curse, a wail rather than a hope, a sneer rather than a faith" (156).

theory, which considers literature from 1760-1937, remains relevant in later writing, especially the Civil Rights period, widespread with racial tension, discrimination, and poverty. For example, in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Beneatha, a college student, rejects God, whom she feels gets credit for humans' accomplishment. Later, Eldridge Cleaver writes in *Soul on Ice*: "Had I been fool enough to go to the Protestant chapel, one black face in a sea of white, and with guerilla warfare going on between us, I might have ended up a Christian martyr—St. Eldridge the Stupe" (41). Ernest Gaines's first two novels, *Catherine Carmier* and *Of Love and Dust* and the short-story collection *Bloodline* were published in the 1960s. Gaines released *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* in 1971. Additionally, though the publication dates for *In My Father's House* and *A Lesson Before Dying* are 1978 and 1993 respectively, the setting for both is the 1940s. Thus, it is the general disillusionment with religion from the late 1940s through the 1960s that is prevalent in Gaines's work, for he, too, was greatly impacted by the social situation.²

The settings of Gaines's fiction, however, range from slavery to modern day; thus his work incorporates the abovementioned changing attitudes toward Christianity and serves as a paradigm for an examination of African-American faith. Gaines consistently inserts Christian attitudes and values in his writing as a backdrop for his primary focal points: manhood and societal disharmony. Accordingly, along with his faith-driven characters, Gaines incorporates self-avowed atheists, the spiritually confused, humanists,

² In an interview with Anne Simpson in *A Gathering of Gaines* (1991), Gaines shares his experiences with discrimination: segregation in bus stations, random stops by police, colored eating sections, racist store merchants, and cabdrivers who refused to serve him (31).

and wavering Christians. These characters often wholly deny God's existence or seek alternatives to orthodox religion. Gaines notes that he assumed such a stance because prior to the Civil Rights Movement, he felt the church was more concerned with "sending someone to heaven rather than with creating social changes" (O'Brien 37). Gaines's attitude regarding religion mirrors that of his contemporaries. For example, the protagonist of Jimmy Garrett's *And We Own the Night* (1968) kills his own mother because she upholds Christian beliefs. James Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him" (46). However, despite negative attitudes toward God in black writing, many African-American writers incorporated some form of religion in their writings and personal lives.³

In a 1986 interview with William Parill, Gaines, without making a distinction between religion and the church, states that religion is not a theme in which he is interested, but "the church is always there in the back of all the stories and all the novels" (186). Such is the case with several Southern writers.⁴ Gaines's lack of interest in religion, however, is not well veiled. Because the prominent themes of Gaines's writing

³ Several authors offer contrasting views of God and Christianity in their literature. See Langston Hughes, "Acceptance," "God to Hungry Child," and "Goodbye Christ" in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1994); James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (1927) and *Along This Way* (1933); and James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1954) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963).

⁴ In a 1958 interview with Jean Stein for the *Paris Review*, William Faulkner comments that in the South, Christianity is gradually absorbed: "I grew up with that. I assimilated that, took that in without even knowing it. It's just there. It has nothing to do with how much of it I might believe or disbelieve—it's just there" (136). Alice Walker, interviewed by Claudia Tate in 1983, offers a similar observation regarding ingrained religious beliefs: "I've also been trying to rid myself of the whole notion of God as a white haired, British man with big feet and beard. . . . As a subjugated people, that image has always been imprinted on our minds, even when we think it hasn't" (178-79).

are black manhood and race relations, such issues serve as the focus of a majority of the criticism of his novels and short stories. When Christianity emerges, Gaines's primary characters usually express mistrust or rejection. As a result, critics who address religiosity in Gaines's work tend to note his mistrust of religion, comment on the failure of religion, or categorize his many preacher characters as merely perfunctory. A primary example is Marcia Gaudet's sweeping generalization regarding traditional religion in Ernest Gaines's fiction, specifically his short stories:

There is both a need for religious faith and also a questioning of that faith, including a mistrust of organized religion, black preachers, and others who profess to be religious. Although God and prayer are often the first source the people [Gaines's characters] turn to for help and compassion, traditional religion and preachers are inadequate to meet their needs and always fail them.

("Failure of Traditional Religion" 81)

William Nash contends that the impact of religion is negative because of the "consistent weakness" of preachers who promote adherence to Christ and social passivity (346).

Similarly, John Roberts refers to Gaines's typical minister as "a translator of community values, not a proponent of change" because the men adhere to a common set of values for the entire community ("Individual and the Community" 111). Furthermore, Lee Papa argues that Gaines and his characters create "a new religiosity that stands at an opposite pole from Christianity" because denial of the church, "a system of white oppression" is the route to freedom (187). James Giles contends that the congregants of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* adhere to a "warped Christianity" because they do not readily engage in social activism (47). Mary Ellen Doyle suggests Gaines expresses skepticism regarding religious conversion in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*

because Jane's description of her travels (conversion) includes a white God, and she carries a load (144). Doyle makes the same claim regarding *In My Father's House* because of protagonist Phillip Martin's negative behavior after his conversion (163).

I argue that such criticism fails to address fully the role of religion in the fiction. Because of the ubiquitousness of religious content in Gaines's writing, I argue that Gaines expresses neither authorial rejection of nor ambivalence toward religion. Instead, his stance is usually paradoxical. Characters who are atheists or claim to have lost faith are the primary characters who epitomize Christian traditions and characteristics. For instance, they use preacherly techniques such as speech and mannerisms. Others exemplify biblical characters through parallel lifestyles. Additionally, Gaines's characters uphold black religious traditions such as engaging in quests for redemption, seeking forgiveness, providing guidance and counseling, and vocalizing and adhering to biblical dogma. Gaines inserts preacher personas whose words and actions seem to support the notion the men are perfunctory, yet their roles as motivators and activists suggest otherwise. Additionally, Gaines's preachers Simmons and Johnson of "A Long Day in November" and "Boy in the Double-Breasted Suit," respectively, allow the author to add Christian-based folk humor to his fiction. I argue that in spite of Gaines's characters' mistrust of or disbelief in religion, Christian principles impact and guide their behaviors and thoughts.

Some critics do, however, address Christianity in Gaines's work in detail, such as Christ parallels (the most frequent topic of religion-based criticism), Satanic figures, and the impact of religion on characters. Kirkland Jones analyzes the differing views of God

held by characters in *Of Love and Dust*. Audrey Vinson discusses Reverend Phillip Martin of *In My Father's House*, Charlie Biggs of *A Gathering of Old Men*, and Jimmy of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as crucifixion archetypes. Deborah Plant explores Reverend Martin's tension in reconciling his reckless past with his church-centered present. Also, Herman Beavers briefly discusses religious ideology and how it relates to Jimmy of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Additionally, with *A Lesson Before Dying*, Trudier Harris does an extensive treatment of the religious fortitude of Emma and Tante Lou, Sarah Baker critiques the novel as a literary spiritual, and Valerie Babb discusses Grant's "grappling" with spirituality. William Nash explores the positive communal impact of religion in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Finally, Lee Papa presents an in-depth argument that Gaines's characters reject the church and create a new religion.

The amount of criticism involving religion, though, is minimal considering the plethora of literary articles generated by Gaines's fiction. While I also include a discussion of biblical parallels overlooked by critics, my primary intent is to counter the general notion that Christianity fails in Gaines's fiction. Religion impacts all of Gaines's characters whether they are aware of it or not. Furthermore, it is a guiding force in four of Gaines's male characters' efforts to define manhood: Jefferson and Grant Wiggins of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Charlie Biggs of *A Gathering of Old Men*, and Reverend Martin of *In My Father's House*.

In Chapter One, "The Preacher Dynamic," I argue that Gaines's preacher personas, who are the recipients of the harshest criticism, are not feckless as most critics

contend but are uplifting and empowering. Reverend Jameson of *A Gathering of Old Men* is the subject of a majority of the criticism. Critics Mary Ellen Doyle, Mary Harper, Lee Papa, Karla Holloway, Patricia Rickels, and David Estes summarily categorize Jameson as a weak, cowardly, embarrassing figure of derision. I contradict such notions with an exploration of Jameson as self-sacrificing motivator who strives for the good of the community. The paradox is that Jameson's many semblances of weakness veil an underlying strength of character and determination. I also argue that Reverend Armstrong of *Catherine Carmier*, who is overlooked by critics, embraces orthodox Christianity but is not ineffective. Instead, he possesses the forward thinking to realize that supporters must adapt to the changing social climate in order to attract people to the church. Armstrong's program for change is not anti-Christianity but modern adjustment. Regarding the novel *In My Father's House*, instead of focusing solely on Reverend Martin's materialism as critic William Nash does, I argue that the preacher displays redeeming characteristics such as compassion and self-assessment. Most importantly, I discuss Martin's characterization as it relates to the theme of atonement, a key principle of Christianity. Gaines initially presents the preacher as a self-centered abuser of authority. Then through unexpected reversals in the storyline, Martin emerges as a fallen and very much human individual who is offered a redemptive opportunity. Furthermore, I disagree with Tuire Valkeakari's assessment of Reverend Peters of the same novel as a "pathetic" preacher. I argue that Peters plays two distinct roles in Reverend Martin's quest for identity: he represents preachers of Martin's past, and he serves as a father figure for Martin.

Chapter Two, “The Preacher-Scholar Debate,” discusses a frequent occurrence in Gaines’s fiction. I dissect the argument presented by Gaines’s preachers and scholars, disagreeing with critics who promote the scholar as victor in the conflicts. For example, William Nash contends that “Gaines sets up conflict between ministers and young, educated, militant African Americans and consistently resolves it in favor of the younger generation” (1). Similarly, Robert Luscher and Herman Beavers argue that in “The Sky is Gray,” the student’s logic overwhelms the preacher; however, such criticism fails to discuss fully the student’s failures and subsequent empty victory. I also consider the intellectual/ country preacher debates among Jimmy Aaron and Reverend Banks and Deacon Thomas of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as well as the debate between Reverend Martin and Jonathan Robillard of *In My Father’s House*, which presents another level of consideration since Jonathon is also a minister. Finally, I discuss the extended conflict between Grant Wiggins and Reverend Mose Ambrose of *A Lesson Before Dying*. This is Gaines’s most defining debate, for the two men serve as the standard to which all of Gaines’s preachers and scholars should aspire. As a primary focus, I argue that there is no definitive victor in any of the debates. Instead, I establish that Gaines’s debates highlight the necessity of a unified agenda for the two groups. As long as they oppose each other, they hinder progress toward achieving social equality for blacks. I argue that Gaines’s preacher and scholar groupings represent a gamut of maturity levels, ranging from the inappropriate behavior of both the unnamed preacher and scholar of “The Sky is Gray” to the mutually constructive relationship that forms between Grant and Reverend Ambrose of *A Lesson Before Dying*. This interaction

represents the ideal, an outcome in which all sides can emerge victorious. Christianity emerges as a necessity in the search for manhood and equality, not as an ineffective or dying concept.

“Biblical Parallels,” Chapter Three, covers pairings that have been overlooked or glossed over in criticism. I focus on Gaines’s incorporation of the Christian tenet of divine election as the foundation for his characterizations. Albert Wertheim identifies Big Laura of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as a Moses type but does not fully develop the parallel, saying only that like Moses, Big Laura upholds moral laws (222). I note other distinguishing similarities between the two such as leadership skills, physical attributes, and affiliations. Additionally, I consider characteristics shared by Copper of “Bloodline” and the biblical Samson, a parallel which critics have not addressed. The two men share physical attributes as well as revenge-filled destinies. Finally, I highlight similarities in the rivalries between Jackson Bradley and Raoul Carmier of *Catherine Carmier* and their biblical counterparts, Jacob and Laban, respectively. Their many likenesses promote my argument that Gaines is not rejecting Christianity; instead, the juxtaposition of biblical characters and his modern ones illustrates that Christianity impacts Gaines’s character development and storylines.

Chapter Four is entitled “Homage to Folk Tradition.” Here, I explore Gaines’s treatment of two folklore elements: the conjure or hoodoo woman and the archetypal folktale preacher. The author incorporates the historical component of voodoo by removing the negative connotations associated with the African religion. In this sense, Gaines legitimizes African religion and removes the stigma associated with superstition.

Thus, his conjure women emerge as counselors who offer sound advice, not as sorcerers who dabble in evil and the supernatural. Gaines's "fake" sorceresses who espouse sacred principles are yet another example of his paradoxical approach to religion. Regarding the folklore preacher, while most critics recognize the comedic element in Gaines's writing (language and characterization), they overlook the humorous trappings of the folktale preacher displayed brilliantly by Reverend Simmons of "A Long Day in November" and Reverend Johnson of "The Boy in the Double-Breasted Suit." Thus, Doyle's description of Johnson as a fool and power abuser (31) fails to address the purpose of the preacher's supposedly inappropriate actions, such as displaying poor table manners and fighting. I argue that Johnson's crude behavior and Simmons's appearance and disinterest in non-parishioners are part of their roles as comic vehicles and foils to the other characters. Gaines explains his motivation: "I think in much black folklore and blues that even when things are at their worst there's often something humorous that comes through" (Gaudet and Wooten 212). Simply stated, Gaines is being true to form. Critics Joseph Griffin, Valerie Babb, Todd Duncan, and Marcia Gaudet take the preacher characters too seriously. They correctly categorize the two characters as ineffectual, self-centered, simplistic, out of touch, or impotent, but they miss the fact that the accentuated negative attributes are Gaines's insertion of humor. I argue that Simmons and Johnson do not represent real-life church leaders and cannot, therefore, be used to make the argument that Gaines mistrusts the church or religion fails in the fiction.

Chapter Five explores characters I refer to as Gaines's "New-Age Apostles." I uncover marked similarities, mannerisms, and behaviors between Gaines's most visible,

self-professed atheists and non-Christian characters and their Christian counterparts. One such example is Munford Bazille, whose jailhouse exhortation fits perfectly into the mold of the standard sermon rendered by the black preacher. Another new-age apostle is Charlie Biggs of *A Gathering of Old Men*. I argue that his sermon-like speech regarding his attainment of manhood can be considered a religious conversion as well. I also discuss the neo-apostle Ned Douglass of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Critics John Lowe and Jack Hicks suggest that Ned, one of Gaines's most profound characters, delivers a speech comparable to Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" and Ezekiel's exhortation, "The Valley of the Dry Bones," but again, the mentions are brief and without elaboration because of the critics' limited consideration of Christianity in the novel. Next, I consider Marcus Payne of *Of Love and Dust* as a "silent" minister whose actions, instead of his words, inspire redemptive Christian behavior. My concluding topic in this section is the incorporation of the black athlete as new apostle. Characters consider the athletes godly emissaries sent for their uplift; therefore, I explore the characters' treatment of the athletes as God's means to both empower and chastise.

In Chapter Six, "Female Christian Warriors," my focus is the religious women of Gaines's fiction. Gaines's primary theme of attaining or maintaining black male identity has resulted in limited critical attention for his female personas. Gaudet's "Black Women: Race, Gender, and Culture" is an extensive exploration of Gaines's female characters, but she glosses over these characters' religious fortitude. I therefore explore the women's use of Christianity as a weapon in their attempts to impact and empower the males with whom they interact. Also, I explain the role the women's Christian faith and

lifestyles plays in the males' quest for a sustained sense of manhood. My discussion includes Julie Rand and Aunt Margaret of *Of Love and Dust* who attempt to sway Marcus Payne from his destructive lifestyle, which is destined to destroy not only him but also other plantation dwellers. Next, I consider Emma of *A Lesson Before Dying* and her efforts to convince her godson Jefferson that he is a man despite whites' animalistic depiction of him. Finally, I analyze Charlotte Moses of *Catherine Carmier* and her quest to restore religious faith in Jackson Bradley, her nephew.

To analyze Gaines's treatment of religion, I highlight his use of four primary elements of narratology. First is Gaines's incorporation of imagery, specifically the imagery of falling. Gaines's characters, by virtue of racial inequalities and discriminatory treatment or because of bad judgment, frequently experience psychological downfalls. Gaines usually pairs these psychological falls with physical ones to emphasize the image. Key examples are Reverend Jameson and Charlie Biggs of *A Gathering of Old Men*, Reverend Martin of *In My Father's House*, Jefferson of *A Lesson Before Dying*, and the unnamed scholar of "The Sky is Gray." In these moments of downfall, Christianity emerges most clearly as Gaines skillfully incorporates the biblical notion of falling as a means to rise victoriously. The imagery appears frequently enough to be considered motif when considering Gaines's fiction collectively, for falling is always synonymous with inherent, though often repressed, strength. The male characters, striving to attain or to vocalize a sense of manhood, must undergo a rite of passage in order to discover and utilize such strength.

A second element Gaines employs is a narrative tactic that I categorize as “rhetorical manipulation,” which does not refer to the negative connotative meanings of the term. Instead, I suggest Gaines creates a reader mindset and then subverts it through injection of unconventional or startling discourse. Specifically, Gaines exploits the reader’s expectation and anticipation of authoritative narrative voice(s). For instance, he allows murderers such as Munford Bazille of “Three Men” and Marcus Payne of *Of Love and Dust* to serve as the voice of morality, and in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson, a barely literate male of limited intelligence, creates a text of morality. Another tactic is to embed religious rhetoric within secular dialogue through language containing dual meanings. For example, when Catherine Carmier of the same-titled novel clings to a church building during a physical altercation, she is simultaneously resisting forgoing her faith to marry a nonbeliever. Gaines repeatedly paraphrases scripture in each novel, recasting it in modern language replete with Southern, black, and rural idioms. Even when the current theme is nonbiblical, the language is often rife with biblical overtones. Additionally, Gaines adds humor to his fiction through wordplay and ironic dialogue. The end result is the implicit immersion of the reader in religiosity as background for Gaines’ focus on manhood and race.

Another narratological technique Gaines employs is dismantling stereotype through narration and focalization (who speaks/ narrates and who sees/ focalizes). The author undermines stereotype in his portrayal of the conjure woman by examining her abilities based on the perceptions of her diverse clientele. Gaines engages the reader by catering initially to preconceived notions through incorporation of folkloric or media-

driven descriptions and antics, such as appearance and eerie surroundings. His intentional emphasis of stereotypical renderings of the conjure woman sets up the reversal. As the stories unfold, Gaines replaces flawed representations with historical ones, depicting hoodoo culture as a religious entity. In this sense, Gaines's treatment of hoodoo forms a subcategory of rhetorical manipulation. Similarly, in creating his archetypal folk preacher, Gaines embellishes stereotype to create over-the-top representations of the greedy, self-centered personas. To present these characters, Gaines utilizes naïve child narrators whose imaginative, detailed descriptions emphasize the preachers' speech and mannerisms. My juxtaposition of the preachers of the folk tale with Gaines's renderings supports an intentionality in designing a modern-day counterpart of the humorous personas of the preacher tales. Thus, I argue that Gaines is not demeaning preachers with his depiction; instead, he is paying homage to the originators of the preacher-tale genre.

Finally, in all of his fiction, Gaines incorporates biblical allusion and typological symbolism and archetypes. The imagery of falling, by virtue of religious content in the fiction, alludes to the Edenic fall through which humankind is granted redemption through Christian grace. Gaines's fallen figures struggle for existence in the post-Edenic setting in which man has the capacity to recover lost or stolen manhood. Gaines includes religious symbols such as bells and woodpeckers, and spiritual females surround themselves with Christian icons such as crucifixes, pictures, and figurines which serve as tangible comforts. Additionally, allusions to biblical themes such as the prodigal son and spiritual conversion are present in the literature. Characters' actions, with the

accompanying religious discourse, frequently allude to biblical counterparts and circumstance: overcoming adversaries, revenge, redemption, and longsuffering.

The concept of Christianity is a broad one with manifold strands; therefore, it is necessary to delineate exactly what constitutes Christianity in Gaines's fiction. Gaines's characters respond to the ecumenical nature of Christianity as presented in the Bible. With the exception of characters singing Termination Songs, Gaines does not branch off into the rituals of various Christian sects. There is no mention of revivals, baptism, foot washing, or communion practices. However, the primary factor is the perception of God. Gaines's characters emphasize both the compassionate yet revengeful deliverer of the Old Testament and the impartial redeemer of the New Testament. For the faithful personas, Christianity is the essence of being: "'You'll leave your church and just become--- nothing?'" (*A Lesson Before Dying* 114). Gaines does make slight reference to the Muslim faith with his persona Robert X of *In My Father's House*, but he inserts no categorization of Islam as an ideal, nor does his fiction promote Islam over Christianity.

The concept of Christian faith can be dubious, and even Gaines himself appears to be struggling with religious faith as evidenced in a 1973 interview: "[B]y the time I started writing I figured that any religion or none at all were equal to just about the same thing. None of them are gonna cure things, or solve all the problems. I don't think religions solve anything" (Ingram and Steinberg 51). In a series of interviews with Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooten from 1986-1987, Gaines responds to a question regarding concepts in the world which should be retained: "I would think a faith in God is one thing" (49). The two statements suggest a frustrated mindset in regard to Christianity,

one that is consistent in Gaines's fiction. In yet another conversation on the topic, Gaines notes, "My church is the oak tree. My church is the river. My church is walking right down the cane field road . . . That's my church. I can talk to God there as well as I can talk to Him in Notre Dame" (*Mozart and Leadbelly* xix). Gaines's statements suggest the necessity of a means to express spirituality for a new generation. Such a change was necessitated by a white hegemony which impacted blacks' upward mobility and compelled them to challenge the standing bulwarks of their ancestors, primarily Christianity. However, what Gaines cannot escape are the Christian tenets and prevailing attitudes of acceptance that pervade his fiction, whether he is aware of it or not and regardless of what the primary focus of the writing happens to be.

In spite of or perhaps because of the means by which Gaines incorporates religiosity into his writing, Christianity emerges as much more than a guarantor of a heavenly home; it is a source of guidance, comfort, protection, and empowerment. Gaines appears to be motivated by a cultural phenomenon. In his study of the black church, historian William Montgomery theorizes that as a result of a breach in cultural evolution, "myths and institutions of the present culture become disconnected from the past. People forget the exact origins of their culture, but do not necessarily lose their distinctive cultural identity or their awareness of it" (1). Gaines appears to have suffered such a severance yet incorporates Christian content in his literature because his religious awareness is so firmly ingrained. Thus, loss of Christianity for Gaines's characters does not amount to a loss of faith.

My ultimate contention is that Gaines promotes orthodox Christianity by presenting it in an acceptable modern form. Utilizing a range of characters who exhibit varied attitudes toward religion from unquestioning acceptance to outright rejection, Gaines “seemingly” advocates negative attitudes toward Christianity, but this exploitation of the negative repeatedly serves as a segue to reveal a positive update. In a 1978 interview with Patricia Rickels, Gaines makes the point that even though his characters may express a certain sentiment, the sentiment is not necessarily his (131). Despite the characters’ dialogic of negation, lurking in the background of each tale is a positive historical or cultural factor related to religion, specifically the black religious experience. Using modern rhetoric and circumstance, Gaines’s reworking results in the restoration of a lost connection to the past, thereby proving that religion is an inescapable, fundamental aspect of African-American culture.

CHAPTER II

THE PREACHER DYNAMIC

“The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss,’ an intriguer, an idealist,—all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number. The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his preeminence, and helps him maintain it.”

*W.E.B. DuBois*⁵

“The ministry was the profession that suffered most—and still suffers, though there has been great improvement—on account of not only ignorant but in many cases immoral men who claimed that they were ‘called to preach.’”

*Booker T. Washington*⁶

Historical representations of slavery have resulted in varied perceptions of the slave preacher’s character. For instance, sociologist Charles Hamilton notes that some preachers served as tools for slaveholders by imposing a gospel of black submission to whites, a job for which whites rewarded the preachers (37). Other slave preachers, however, were true leaders who extracted a positive message from the “twisted” theology of oppressors. Many slaves feigned acceptance of white Christianity but embraced differing views.⁷ Hamilton also discusses preachers such as Nat Turner who were so opposed to slavery that they prompted congregations to consider violent force in

⁵ “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” *The Souls of Black Folks*, p. 149.

⁶ “The Reconstruction Period,” *Up From Slavery*, p. 66.

⁷ See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (1972); Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (1921); and Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (1956).

overcoming oppressors (37-38).⁸ Historian David Shannon adds that slave preachers often delivered sermons rife with double entendre, falsely leading white listeners to believe the message was one of docility and acceptance of the status quo (120). Paul Laurence Dunbar's "An Antebellum Sermon" makes humorous play of the rebellious tradition:

Now don't run an' tell yo' mastahs
Dat I's preachin' discontent.
'Cause I isn't; I'se a-judgin'
Bible people by deir ac's
I'se a-givin' you de Scriptuah,
I'se a-handin' you de fac's.
Cose ole Pher'oh b'lieved in slav'ry,
But de Lawd he let him see,
Dat de people e put bref in, --
Evah motha's son was free. (13)

Though Dunbar's poem plays on stereotypical renderings of the slave preacher, Hamilton contends that slaves knew the difference between imposed slave religion and true religion; thus they trusted the preacher to deliver the "true word of God" (39).⁹

Far removed from the prominent stature of the slave preacher, by the 1960s the African American preacher encountered perceptions ranging from "total acceptance and appreciation on the one hand to total rejection and disfavor on the other" (H. Beecher

⁸ In *The Black Preacher in America* (1972), the first full-length study of the black preacher, Charles Hamilton offers a historical and current portrayal of aspects of the life of the black preacher with emphasis on his role in the church and black community. Hamilton's study considers the ministry during slavery, denominations, education and the ministry, preachers and political activism, preacher/ parishioner conflict, experience and formal training, self-reliance, and preacher/ youth relationships.

⁹ In *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), Kenneth Stampp discusses slaveholders' attempts to control slaves' behavior after exposure to Christianity. Religious instruction taught that insolence against a master equated to insolence against God, and servants should obey their masters. Others censored the Bible by removing "inappropriate" passages, prepared special catechisms and sermons, and provided specific instructions for religious indoctrination (156-62).

Hicks 18). Historian Joseph Washington explains: faced with the evils of segregation and discrimination following Reconstruction, the Negro minister succumbed to the “cajolery and bribery” of the white power structure. Instead of freedom, he preached only moralities and heavenly rewards. The minister redirected the enthusiasm of folk religion to gain power. The minister’s thwarting of black religion reached its height during the Depression and continued into the sixties. Some congregants regarded black preachers as “blood suckers,” “fake leaders,” and “money-mad” (53-55). Gaines’s portrayal of his preacher personas is a response to a predominant view of the period—the preacher as immoral or inept. However, sociological studies indicate that despite such mindsets, a majority of African Americans desired a connection to the church and exposure to a black preacher.¹⁰ This real-life paradox serves as a model for the literary paradox that Gaines establishes in his writing. Appropriating the alleged weaknesses of the preacher in the literature is a means to reveal the positives of the more complex, well-rounded preacher personality. According to Washington, as the protest movement began, the black minister resumed his expected role as race leader (56). The vitality of the minister emerges in Gaines’s preachers despite other characters’ perceptions of them.

Examination of the extended role of the preacher in Gaines’s fiction establishes those characters as motivating forces who only appear to be staid or ineffectual in order to uplift and encourage others, making them aware of repressed strength. When critics

¹⁰ In *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya provide statistics on a range of topics regarding black clergy, black denominations, church growth and finances, and black churches and political activism. A study spanning the twentieth-century indicates that 78 percent of the black population claimed church membership and attended church on more Sundays than all Americans. Additionally, black parishioners donated a higher percentage of the charitable dollar and more volunteer time to the church than to any other organization (382).

focus on Gaines's common theme of achieving or proclaiming manhood, they overlook the preacher as positive instigator or agitator in the process. For example, in the article "Survival With Dignity," Heglar and Refoe discuss Grant Wiggins's role in making the condemned youth Jefferson realize he is a man. However, these critics do not once mention Reverend Ambrose's interactions with Grant or Jefferson even though Ambrose's encounters with both are crucial to Jefferson's reformation. Likewise, when analyzing the elderly men of *A Gathering of Old Men*, Heglar and Refoe overlook Reverend Jameson though his presence also impacts the others. Because the primary duty of the preachers is to offer biblical consolation to the continuing faithful, their actions often appear static to characters with socially driven concerns and problems. Paradoxically, the preachers' supposed weaknesses evidence the men's strength and purpose.

A primary example of such an instigator is Reverend Jameson of *A Gathering of Old Men*. The storyline of the novel unites the elderly men of the community as they come together to defend one of their own while simultaneously seeking revenge for previous wrongs perpetrated against family members. Eighteen black men gather at the home of Mathu, Charlie's parrain (godfather), after Charlie murders Beau Boutan, a member of a family of Cajuns notorious for committing racial and criminal atrocities against neighboring blacks. Each senior claims to have committed the crime. As they await retaliation by Boutan's family, Gaines casts Jameson as the weakest link, laying the groundwork for Jameson's fall from favor in the communal dynamic. Jameson is immediately isolated from the crowd. Additionally, he is the only male present without a

gun. The phallic image of the shotguns wielded by eighteen black males connotes potent masculinity and virility. Thus, the unarmed reverend stands in stark contrast, seemingly impotent and emasculated.

Candy, a white plantation owner, has devised the plan to protect Mathu, whom she wrongly thinks is the culprit. When Candy sends a child to gather the local men, she requests the reverend specifically, indicative of his worth to the undertaking: ““I want you to go tell Rufe and Reverend Jameson and Corrine and the rest of them to gather at Mathu’s house right away”” (4). Candy is not randomly selecting plantation dwellers. Jameson, like the others, has a distinct role to play in the pending defense of Mathu. Candy is well aware of the limitations of the septuagenarians. Her immediate rejection of Jameson after she requests his presence suggests she planned to use him as a scapegoat to boost the other men’s courage. Despite her intent, the storyline foreshadows the positive role that religion will play in the showdown with Beau’s supporters. The elderly men’s determination to assert their honor and manhood echoes the sentiment of Claude McKay’s poem, “If We Must Die”: “Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,/ Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back” (63). However, painful memories of past wrongs committed against them have not been enough to prompt the men to defend themselves. Instead, Mat, one of the summoned men, attributes their newfound empowerment to God:

“He works in mysterious ways . . . Give a old nigger like me one more chance to do something with his life. He gived me that chance, and I’m taking it, I’m going to Marshall. Even if I have to die at Marshall. I know I’m old, maybe even crazy, but I’m going anyhow. . . . Pray if you want to. Pray for all us old fools. But don’t try to stop me. So help me God, woman, don’t try to stop me.” (38)

Mat asserts a prominent Christian value; God handles matters in His own way and time. Gaines has thus set the stage for a formidable religious component in the story, though it is relegated to the background. The seniors believe that a show of power is the only means for them to declare their manhood. Yet their dialogues concerning God assert that Christianity is not a passive force, but a viable one in revealing the males' inner potential to resist indignity.

Gaines uses Jameson in a paradoxical manner to further instill the value of Christianity. The author establishes Jameson as the outsider, then reverses the negative sentiment generated against him. Thus, as Jameson's positive traits as a motivator emerge, so does the value of Christian faith. First, Gaines utilizes narrative voice to present Jameson as weak. However, he adds another layer of rhetorical manipulation, for the characters who provide evidence of Jameson's supposedly negative traits are biased, unreliable narrators. As a result, Gaines does not demean Jameson, for the discourse designed to devalue the preacher subverts itself, and Jameson emerges as a positive character. In this sense, Gaines allows the reader to reevaluate perceptions of preachers such as Jameson as merely "Uncle Tom" types and focus on his positive attributes: strength and endurance.

Typically in narration, description of a character colors the readers' perception as the narrator inserts his or her own judgment. Gaines uses multiple voices to narrate each section of the novel. Significantly, the three chosen to describe Jameson are Snookum, Clatoo, and Lou Dimes, and each lacks the acuity to render an accurate depiction of him. Snookum, a young boy, initiates a dislike of the reverend, unfairly casting him as a

disciplinarian because Jameson requested that the child attend church. Likewise, the narrator Clatoo, one of the elderly men, imposes his own values upon Jameson, and by extension, the reader. Clatoo injects a negative image of Jameson because the preacher “looked like he hated the sight of us” (51). In contradiction, Clatoo unquestioningly accepts Mathu’s dislike of some of the seniors because of their white ancestry, a factor over which the men have no control. Clatoo makes no effort to discern an alternative explanation for the reverend’s visage, which could easily be attributed to dislike for the men’s plan of action and not them personally. Clatoo’s bias establishes him as an unreliable narrator, but his evaluation prevails, for he is an accepted member of the new community forged by the heroic men. Lou Dimes, Candy’s boyfriend, also presents a biased description of Jameson: “Pathetic, bald, weary-looking little man. He was the only one there who seemed frightened” (61). As a journalist, Dimes habitually displays a detachment that calls his analysis of Jameson and the situation into question. Furthermore, Dimes’s validity as a reliable judge of character is equally flawed by his “vision,” for it is a vision colored by racism. He sees the elderly men as “others,” thereby demeaning their humanness. Categorizing blacks, he ponders, “sometimes it’s hard to estimate their ages” (60). Dimes refers to the elders not as men but as “the one” or “another one.” Therefore, his summation of Jameson based on a first impression with no attempt at insight offers an unsound assessment of Jameson’s true nature. It merely serves as part of Gaines’s manipulation of reader expectation to achieve the end result of promoting Christianity.

As stated, Candy has an ulterior motive for including Jameson; she uses him to bait the other men. The senior ragtag army she has raised is lacking in several ways: many of the men cannot hit a target, Dirty Red, one of the seniors, does not have the strength to carry his gun, and the men appear aged and weak: “Neither of them looked like he was ready for battle” (43). Jameson, therefore, serves a key role as the weaker element through whom all the men can acquire a superior status and maintain strength to stand firm against pending peril, the arrival of the white mob. The seniors are motivated by a communal past rife with atrocities at the hands of racist whites, yet physical limitations cannot be dismissed and require reinforcement. Jameson, who cries as he pleads with the men to forego their intent to fight Fix’s men and the sheriff, is the ideal scapegoat. The old men mock Jameson, threatening to shoot him. Even the women, who constantly defer to the men’s sexist stance, vocally disrespect Jameson and challenge him to fight: “‘Come on, come on, you bootlicker,’ Beulah said. She was winding her fists over and over. ‘I’ll whip you crazier than you already is, or I’ll put some sense in your head—one’” (106). The stage is thus set for Gaines’s reversal.

Gaines allows the scene to evolve into a parody of the preacher’s worth to emphasize Jameson’s fortitude, not because the character is “weak and despised by all, including his author/ creator,” as Doyle contends (190). Overshadowed but not diminished by the constant assaults on his manhood, Jameson’s strength has already evidenced itself. He remains on the scene despite hours of revilement and condemnation. Jameson, like the others, has motivation to defend the parish. Subtle allusions to biblical principles emerge in the reverend’s pleas for peace. First is the Lord’s command to allow

Him to exact vengeance for wrongs. Next, Jameson broaches the notion of blood sacrifice: ““You think you doing him [Mathu] any good if you soak this land with blood?”” (55). Herein lies a distinct allusion to the suffering of Job. He cries in distress as the victim of undeserved suffering: “O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place” (Job 16:18). Jameson questions whether the men’s possible death will have the impact they desire, more specifically if their bloodshed will serve as an efficacious communicator of years of suffering. None of Jameson’s audience responds to his questions, but his point is valid. Jameson’s passive-resistance stance links him to that of Martin Luther King, Jr., who greatly impressed Gaines. In an interview with Patricia Rickels, Gaines lauds King as “one of the three men of this century that I’ll call heroic. A fantastic man as far as I’m concerned, for all that he did” (131). This admiration perhaps offers further explanation for Jameson’s behavior. Jameson chooses to remain at Mathu’s house, fully aware of the events that will soon transpire. If he is truly as afraid as all the men and women assume him to be, this would be the optimum moment for an exit. Obviously, Jameson realizes that his presence is a necessity.

Jameson shows more strength when Sheriff Mapes arrives and extracts information through physical assault, viciously slapping each of the old men whom he interrogates. When it is the reverend’s turn, he looks at Mapes’s feet and responds, “I ain’t got nothing to say, Sheriff” (71). The reverend’s silence empowers his voice. Rhetorician Cheryl Glenn asserts, “Neither speech nor silence is more successful, communicative, informative, revealing, or concealing than the other; rhetorical success

depends on the rhetorical situation” (“Silence” 263).¹¹ With his sustained silence in the face of such enmity, Reverend Jameson has chosen his weapon. Next, Gaines complements Jameson’s fall from status with a physical one. Unlike the other men, when Mapes slaps Reverend Jameson, he “staggered and fell flat on his back” (71). Viewed superficially, the fall suggests a lack of physical strength. However, Jameson rises and stands before Mapes again, responds in the same manner, and is knocked down a second time. As Jameson prepares to repeat the play, every person in the yard lines up to confront Mapes.

Jameson’s display of strength and courage has provided the motivation needed by the collective. Therefore, Jameson is a rallying figure who leads by example and is not weak and ineffective because he promotes nonviolent resolution or falls when Mapes strikes him as several critics contend. For instance, Lee Papa describes Jameson as “another religious figure who crumbles in the face of adversarial conditions” (188). Estes presents a similar criticism, wrongly castigating Jameson as an “embarrassing fool” who does not master his fear (244), and Harper attributes Jameson’s falls to “fear and spiritual weakness” (304). Such criticism is shortsighted, for in the very act of rising, Jameson reveals strength indicative of a fighter. Here Gaines injects more biblical allusion, for hidden in Jameson’s demeanor is adherence to Christian dogma, turning the other cheek and the notion of falling only to emerge victorious: “Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down” (Psa 37:24). In his article, “You Think a Man Can’t Kneel and Stand,” William Nash lauds Reverend Ambrose of *A Lesson Before Dying* as a “devoted servant

¹¹ In *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (2004), Glenn also refutes the notion that silence is a form of passive acceptance. Instead, she privileges strategic silence as an expressive, authoritative rhetoric (15-18).

who can truly minister to the community's needs" (348). By virtue of his service to the group dynamic, Jameson is deserving of the same criticism.

Doyle does, however, question Gaines's fairness in his decision to make Jameson the only man who falls, for Jameson, like the others, has silently suffered the abuse of racist whites over the years (190). In the movie version of the novel, Gaines, who was not the screenwriter, adds that the actors playing the old men refused to let the reverend fall to the ground. The actors insisted the minister must be as strong as the other characters even if they disagreed, so the screenwriters changed the script. Gaines concedes ". . . maybe they were right" (Lowe 309). The actors appear to be motivated by real-life circumstance. As seniors, they would be aware of the strength over adversity illustrated by the black preacher collective. Doyle does not take this factor into consideration when she concludes that Jameson's "weakness thus seems to be more a function of his church calling" (190). Countering Doyle's assessment, Montgomery asserts that despite their critics, black preachers were "the only group of leaders who crossed the line between the political, religious, and social realms and who represented the status and economic elites on one hand and the masses of poor and illiterate freedmen on the other" (307). As leaders, they established themselves as integral components of the black community. Though Jameson's defiance lacks the impact of an armed assemblage, he asserts his agency in the most appropriate manner.

Jameson has proven his worth and is later recognized by one of the elderly men as a member of the oppressed on the plantation: "'Ask Glo,' Johnny Paul said. 'Ask Tucker. Gable. Clatoo. Ask Yank. Jameson there. Ask any of them, all of them what they don't

see no more'” (89). Johnny Paul’s comment is Gaines’s employment of another narratological element, referential description, in which the presence of certain elements implies the absence of others. Missing are elements of the past that have been destroyed by the current racist social environment: families, property, flowers, and the church. The group’s present vision is situated in the past, and Jameson shares an awareness of the emptiness they all sense. Throughout the novel, the elderly men all recount racist actions perpetrated against family members, such as stolen property, rapes, murders, and torture leading to emotional collapse. Though Jameson does not share a story with the group, syllogistic reasoning supports the assumption that because he has lived in the parish many years, he has also been a victim of or at least a witness to extreme racism. The preacher is not outside the community though his adherence to biblical principle may cause him to be considered so by those who do not truly see his worth.

As the conflict persists, Jameson continues to stand his ground when the crowd enlarges his role of scapegoat. When Mapes asks why Jameson will not go home, the reverend responds, ““This is my place”” (106). A rhetorical duality exists; “my place” represents both Jameson’s home and his role as spiritual leader and supporter. The notion contradicts Holloway’s assertion of Jameson’s “selfish protectionism” and “cowardly self-indulgence” (189). Comparing Jameson to Reverend Martin of *In My Father’s House*, who protects his son at the risk of jeopardizing a protest march, Holloway suggests that following a Christian ethic makes the preachers’ followers impotent (189). However, Jameson strives to protect what the community of old men strives to protect, dignity as men. It is also inaccurate to categorize him as Joseph Griffin does as “the

novel's principal Uncle Tom figure" ("Calling" 93). Critic John Grisby, who analyzes Uncle Tom characters in four novels, contends that they differ based upon specific factors: society-created interests (such as religious background), the author's prejudices or racism, and the author's purpose.¹² He notes only one predominant trait: "Uncle Tom cares more for white people than he does for himself or for his own people, even his immediate family" (53-55). Grisby's assessment counters Joseph Griffin's assertion. Jameson's interest is not in the preservation of white aggressors, especially to the detriment of blacks. The preacher defies authority where characters such as Stowe's Uncle Tom or Bontemps's Ben in *Black Thunder* would never consider doing so. Instead, Reverend Jameson assumes a guardianship role and maintains it until the end, an act that does not demonstrate racial hatred, selfishness, or cowardice.¹³ Later, when the fight between the elderly men and the retaliating whites intensifies, Jameson continues in his role as religious leader, continually calling on God to have mercy on the participants. Gaines's purpose in his depiction of all the men involved in the revolt appears to be the ultimate expression of black manhood, an expression complemented by religion as a necessary and effective component.

In the most appropriate manner, each man present, including Reverend Jameson, has assumed and prospered in the role he is destined to fulfill. Jameson is perhaps

¹² Grisby analyzes Uncle Tom of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe; Old Zed of *The Old Dominion* (1856) by G. P. R. James; Uncle Isham of *Their Shadows Before* (1899) by Pauline Bouvé; and Ben of *Black Thunder* (1936) by Arna Bontemps. Grisby focuses on the authors' religious background, stereotypical attitudes, race, personal acquaintances, and literary backgrounds as contributing factors in their Uncle Tom characterizations.

¹³ In their sociological study *The Jesus Bag* (1971), Grier and Cobbs consider the Uncle Tom designation from another angle. They contend "We have no Uncle Toms, only those of us who have been tortured beyond our capacity." They consider the Tom a casualty who began with the spirit, courage, ideals and nobility that all blacks share, but society crushed them. Therefore, those who vilify the Uncle Tom should recognize him as a wounded member of black society who requires care (173-74).

Gaines's prime example of a paradoxical handling of religion. The author pairs the preacher with the sheriff to generate detest toward them in order to implement reversals in characterization. Mapes assumes the role of the stereotypical, racist Southern sheriff, and Jameson initially appears as the weak, cowardly preacher. However, the novel undermines both evaluations. Sheriff Mapes, by the novel's end, is no longer a bully who resorts to violence to exact the truth but is the fair lawmaker who seeks justice after listening to Charlie's account of self-defense. Most significantly, Gaines masks Jameson's strength to display the preacher's ability to assess a situation and employ the tactics necessary to empower and lead those around him. Presented in this manner, Jameson exudes the strength of his real-life counterparts when engaged in nonviolent civic duty.¹⁴

Unlike the critical attention given to Reverend Jameson, when critics, excluding Nash, address Gaines's preachers, they overlook Reverend Armstrong of *Catherine Carmier*. Nash's mention, though, is fleeting and without elaboration. The critic suggests the impact of religion in Gaines's fiction is negative "largely because of the consistent weakness of the preachers who minister to the communities . . . from Reverend Armstrong . . . to Reverend Jameson (1). Armstrong, the resolute minister, is worthy of consideration, for Gaines paradoxically allows him to express the indomitable nature of

¹⁴ In *Bearing the Cross* (1986), David Garrow discusses the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was committed to a stance of nonviolence. The organization was founded and led by a group of ministers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, C.K. Steele, John Duffy, Ralph Abernathy, Joseph Lowery, T.J. Jemison, and A.L. Davis. All are pioneers recognized for their efforts in the Civil Rights Movement. The ministers maintained their commitment to nonviolence despite violence directed towards them, upholding their motto: "Not one hair of one head of one person should be harmed." During one incident, protestors beat Shuttlesworth with chains and brass knuckles and stabbed his wife for attempting to enroll their child in an all-white school (98).

Christianity even as he acknowledges the idea that traditional Christian worship appears to be a dying concept:

“There ain’t but a few of us left now, Sister Charlotte. Just a few of us left. The old ones leaving us every day, the young ain’t joining no more. So it’s left up to us. Us few to keep it going, to keep the lamp burning till He come back. More than ever before He need us now.” (183)

Armstrong is neither accepting defeat nor admitting that Christianity is ineffective even though youth are moving away from the church.¹⁵ The underlying message is that supporters of Christianity must change their tactics to appeal to a younger generation because, as Armstrong relays to his follower, Charlotte: “‘Things ain’t like they used to be. . . . You got to talk now. You got to talk. You got to talk and pray and hope’” (183). Lawrence Jones, ordained minister and former dean of Howard University’s School of Religion, suggests that though the new constituency requires a program that effectively addresses the urgencies of contemporary life, the black church is not in jeopardy. To many followers, the church represents their only accessible institution for affirmation of identity and a sense of belonging. Dean echoes Gaines’s preacher persona with the notion the black church must “understand the language of the world and translate the gospel into the idioms and symbols of that language” (585-86). Armstrong voices awareness of the changing tide, and his willingness to adapt stands in direct opposition to critics’ overall

¹⁵ In *The Black Preacher in America* (1972), Hamilton addresses a growing trend: among young blacks in their late teens through the mid-thirties, the widespread attitude exists that the church is not useful. Their criticism is also aimed at the black preacher. As a result, the number of youths in black congregations has declined. Instead of affiliations with the traditional church of their parents, young adults are turning to churches engaged in sociopolitical action or with training programs to assist the lower classes. Hamilton includes the activities of Reverend Dempsey of Harlem who works to keep youth in the church by catering to their interests such as dancing and contests (208- 12).

categorization of Gaines's ministers as staid or ineffectual, particularly challenging Nash's notion that the "idea of a minister doing good seems ludicrous and impossible" (359).

In fact, Armstrong convinces Charlotte to relax her matriarchal, guilt-driven control over her nephew Jackson when Jackson decides to leave the parish rather than teach there. Armstrong knows intellectuals such as Jackson will work to erase racial inequalities in society. White and Cajun residents in the area constantly question Jackson's intent, so it is obvious he threatens the status quo. Reverend Armstrong likens Charlotte and Jackson to Mary and Christ, implying that Jackson has a messianic mission: "But she [Mary] gived Him up. Don't you think it was a hardship for her to bear?" (181). Armstrong never states explicitly what he knows to be Jackson's mission, but he asserts strongly, "He must go back" (181). Sacrifice is necessary for attainment of a higher cause.

Gaines uses Armstrong to further the notion that the scholars are not as removed from Christianity as they claim. Though the preacher prevents Charlotte from deterring Jackson's planned departure, he is aware that Jackson has expressed and exhibits a loss of faith. Charlotte attends church each night of Jackson's visit (a point which Gaines belabors), and Jackson never accompanies her despite his devotion to his aunt. Thus, Jackson's behavior raises questions concerning Armstrong's motives in his support of the young man. Armstrong's conversations center on one basic principle, Christian duty. Armstrong is apparently unconvinced that Jackson has abandoned the Christian principles imparted to him in childhood: "Watched him go to school—the first one to take him to

church. Saw that he got religion—baptized’” (181). Though his characterization is secondary in the novel to all the other characters, Armstrong emerges as one of Gaines’s most significant preacher personas because of his sagacity. The preacher’s prediction that a future for Jackson without a prominent Christian component will prove unrewarding is exact. Jackson must eventually relinquish ties to his beloved Catherine, who struggles with several psychological obstacles, primarily Jackson’s rejection of faith.

Additionally, I contend that Armstrong is an effective leader even though he is not socially active. I disagree with Nash who implies that because the preachers in Gaines’s early works are not engaged politically, they offer no value to the community (1). Contrarily, Armstrong excels in his primary duty as religious advisor to his parishioners as demonstrated by his effect on Charlotte: “He touched her on the arm. Electricity ran through her as if the Lord Himself had touched her. She knew from then on her life would be devoted only to God” (184). Furthermore, Armstrong “heals” Charlotte’s relationship with Jackson, freeing up Jackson’s time to pursue plans for the future. Again fulfilling his duty, Armstrong espouses and implements the common Christian notion of personal responsibility. All have a divinely-inspired calling or work that requires diligent attention “Until He calls” (183). Such mindset translates into the secular world; most people adhere to the notion that they are intended to serve some primary purpose in life. Armstrong is not necessarily weak or ineffective because he does not have a political agenda, for he strongly supports those who do.

Unlike Armstrong, Reverend Phillip Martin of *In My Father’s House* is an active leader in the Civil Rights Movement. His social organization, the St. Adrienne Civil

Rights Committee, is comprised of parishioners who have engaged in several successful protests, which often resulted in arrests. However, despite Martin's impressive political record, Gaines's primary focus in the novel is the preacher's attempts to restore his broken relationship to his Christian calling by confronting his past demons. Martin strives to reestablish his status as a man who manages his personal responsibilities, specifically to his wife and children, and as a preacher who attends to the needs of his followers. As the novel's title implies, Gaines aligns Martin's religious calling with issues of manhood. Gaines's scriptural title has dual meaning. In John 14: 2, Jesus comforts his disciples with the reward of faithfulness: "In my father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." Martin challenges his faith, and by biblical code, threatens an afterlife in heaven. Simultaneously, Martin wrestles with the guilt of denying Etienne (now called Robert X), his son from an earlier affair, access to the privileges of father and home. Gaines enforces his dual intent by having Robert X appear unexpectedly in Martin's home, the very circumstance which precipitates Martin's spiritual journey for Christian redemption.

Gaines establishes Martin as the epitome of fallen man. In fact, the imagery of falling appears frequently enough to transform into motif. Martin has spent the early years of his life engaged in riotous behavior, abandoned his mistress and their three children (along with children by three or four other women), profited financially from rich and poor parishioners, and established emotional barriers between himself and his current family. Gaines grants Martin a majority of the traits that have led to distrust of the black preacher by general populace. Theologian H. Beecher Hicks's study highlights

negative images of the black preacher which are perpetuated by literature, drama, and the media. Each genre ascribes morally reprehensible vices to the preacher: hypocrisy, greed, promiscuity, ignorance, and pompousness (41-63). As illustrated, Martin is not the hero/saint many of his followers, despite their knowledge of his past, deem him to be.

In spite of the punctuation of Martin's negative attributes resulting from rambunctious secular living, Gaines humanizes the preacher as he divests him of the guilt of the past and grants redemption. Critics such as Nash focus primarily on Martin's physical build and attire and call him the "stereotypical negative image of the preacher as self-serving materialist" (349). In comparison, Nash contends that in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Reverend Ambrose's "worn clothes and small frame integrate him into the community" (349). However, Martin deserves the same detailed character study that Nash grants Reverend Ambrose. As with Jameson, Gaines imparts negative traits which suggest the preacher is self-centered, then incorporates a reversal in Martin's characterization which uncovers positive attributes. Different from the stereotypical depiction of the materialistic preacher, Martin emerges as a character of greater depth and compassion. Gaines develops in Martin the passive-resistant stance of Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr., even granting his protagonist a similar name. Speaking of the local blacks' primary adversary, Philip Martin advises his followers: "I don't want you to hate Albert Chenal. I want you to pray for Albert Chenal. Tomorrow in church, pray for Albert Chenal. Before you go to bed tonight, pray for Albert Chenal. Remember, love thy neighbor as thyself" (36-37). Mimicking King's preacherly stance, Martin sets up a religious dynamic as the solution for curing Chenal and fellow racists of their

discriminatory mindset. Martin's diatribe is reminiscent of a King speech on the same topic in which King refers to praying for and loving one's enemies as an "absolute necessity for the survival of civilization" ("Loving Your Enemies" 42). Additionally, widespread rumors of Dr. King's promiscuity render Phillip Martin even more comparable to the revered civil rights leader. Next, Martin reminds his audience of the ineffectiveness of relying on either a Black Power platform or its opposite, an apathetic one, to precipitate change. Presented with substantiating evidence, Martin's effective, succinct message is well-received, appealing also to readers aware of King's impact during the Civil Rights Movement. Like King, the fictitious Martin displays admirable and redemptive behavior that does not dismiss but greatly supercedes his shortcomings. With the tactic, Gaines diverts the focus from the negative attributes associated with the black preacher to his redeeming qualities, thereby humanizing Martin. Furthermore, positing Martin as a staunch advocate for civil rights highlights the strides made by religious leaders in the struggle for equality.

If Gaines truly recognized no value in the black preacher of his fiction, he would likely have allowed a character such as Martin little more than suffering, ridicule, or humiliation as a consequence of his previous lifestyle. Instead, Gaines sends Martin on a redemptive journey that takes the fallen preacher back to his roots and forces him to reassess and improve his present life. Martin is allowed to confess his sins, repent, and begin anew—all the rewards available to penitent sinners. Thus, Gaines does not promote the perception of preachers as entirely ineffective, irresponsible, or corrupt; instead, he offers justification for human shortcomings and Christian compassion for fallen sinners.

Preachers are reestablished as humans, neither wholly corrupt nor superhuman, two frequent generalizations.

Reverend Martin is prepared to lead citizens on a march protesting the discriminatory acts of Chenal, a local merchant, when a familial conundrum emerges. Martin learns that the sheriff has arrested Robert X (Etienne), the son that Martin abandoned years earlier. Because Sheriff Nolan has previously arrested Martin for civil rights demonstrations, the sheriff seizes an opportunity to control his opponent. Nolan makes a deal to free Robert if Martin will call off the demonstration. Surprisingly, Martin agrees, placing self interest before the common good of the black citizens of the town. The polarity of the options forces Martin to begin his self-analysis.

Gaines begins with a reworking of the Christian dynamic of the Edenic fall from grace. Adam's punishment from God entailed banishment from Eden, a divine curse of earthly labor, and enmity between man and the serpent, embodied evil. Indeed, Martin's past is a glaring representation of his status as fallen man. Gaines drives the point by granting Martin a literal fall when the preacher swoons and collapses to the floor when Robert X appears at a gathering in Martin's home. Next, Gaines incorporates the biblical notion of punishment for one's sins as an element of redemption. Martin's sin is apostasy, abandonment of his faith in conducting his life. The Bible teaches the different degrees of punishment. Accountability is related to the degree of awareness of the wrong or sin, and the level of awareness determines punishment.¹⁶ Martin's punishment begins when he

¹⁶ Several scriptural passages address accountability and punishment of the redeemed: "For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them" II Peter 2: 20; "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall

senses his manhood waning as Octave Bacheron and Anthony McVay, two prominent whites, physically prevent Martin from rising after his fall. When they do allow him to stand, they force Martin to lean on them as they carry him to his room. McVay even roughly pushes aside Jonathan Robillard, one of the assistant pastors, who attempts to help Martin. Bacheron and McVay represent the factors of slavery that Martin uses to explain his estrangement from his son: “[W]hat kept us apart is a paralysis we inherited from slavery” (202). Martin blames the lingering brands of slavery for the immoral behavior that it demanded and bred in black men. At this point, Martin’s excuse suggests he has not accepted culpability for his transgressions, specifically his role in his alienation from his older children. Thus, Martin’s fall renders him humiliated and psychologically weakened. With tear-filled eyes, he pleads to be allowed to stand. But only whites lift him as his wife Alma follows. Martin accepts his punishment, acknowledging that he is not a man because “Men supposed to clamb up off the floor” (57). The focus shifts more from what Martin has done to what he prepares to do to correct past wrongs. He must begin his redemptive journey to restore not only his sense of manhood but also his spirituality.

When Gaines inserts the Christian principle of blood sacrifice, he sets up a binary of blood and sacrifice. To rescue Robert X, his “blood kin,” whom Martin previously sacrificed for a new life, Martin sacrifices the rights of the townspeople and his own principles. To repent of his past sins, Martin sacrifices his status with the loss of his position as local civil rights leader and his return to a past in which he has an even lower

be much required: and to whom have committed much, of him they will ask more” Luke 12: 48; and “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” Hebrews 12:6.

status. The novel's sacrificial element heightens with Robert X's suicide. Martin must acknowledge his indirect culpability in the death of his son, a symbolic loss of blood, when Robert X sacrifices his own life. Only when Martin accepts responsibility for his sin can he restore his connection to his Christian faith. Vinson's analysis supports the theory of blood sacrifice as it applies to biblical thinking: "The X in his [Robert's] assumed name, while suggestive of the Muslim movement among blacks of the 1960s, is even more suggestive of the abbreviation for Christ" (39). Vinson sees Robert X as a Christ figure, one who is denied, yet gives his life to ensure redemption for Martin (40). The biblical concept of blood sacrifice is not without controversy, for it deems that someone must die or be sacrificed to guarantee salvation for others. However, with Robert X's suicide, Gaines does not critique blood sacrifice but incorporates it as an accepted aspect of Christianity; therefore, Martin is redeemed. Such reliance on biblical principle as an outline for the characters' behavior counters critics' arguments that the author rejects Christianity.

Gaines reinforces the focus on Christianity as a positive by inserting the Muslim component. The Nation of Islam emerged as a dynamic force in black America in the 1920s. According to historian and religion professor John Williams, though the group originated in the North, many of the early converts were southern migrants (117). The Nation of Islam grew in appeal because of its views concerning oppression. It was not principally a religious body, but an organization designed to assuage the socioeconomic plight of black Americans (Marsh 3). Unlike Christianity, which taught African Americans to love their oppressors in expectation of a heavenly reward, the Nation of

Islam focused on personal uplift through heightened self-respect. The group received the favor of the disillusioned masses. However, both Muslim and Christian ministers worked to enhance African American social awareness and dignity by declaring that God did not favor black oppression. As an end result, Southerners who leaned primarily toward Christianity were prone to listen to but not join the followers of the Nation of Islam (Williams 118-19).

The growing appeal of the Nation of Islam, though not stated explicitly in the novel, may explain Robert X's association with the group. Nevertheless, an unquestioned acceptance of Robert X's denunciation of Christianity is problematic. Robert's internal demon is his sense of emasculation for not retaliating when his mother's boyfriend rapes Justine, Robert's sister. Robert X's troubled conscience causes him to strike out at everyone and everything except the rapist and to transfer blame for his overwhelming guilt to God, the law, and Martin, their absent father. Then, Robert X is further emasculated when his younger brother Antoine actually kills their sister's rapist after repeatedly entreating Robert X to do so. Upon returning from jail, Antoine severs all ties to their mother, Johanna, and his brother, yet another devastating blow to Robert X's self esteem. One tenet of the Nation of Islam decrees, "We believe our women should be respected and protected as the women of other nationalities are respected and protected" (Williams 64). When Robert X fails to take revenge against his sister's rapist and against Martin for deserting Johanna and Robert's siblings, the troubled youth experiences a sense of overwhelming personal failure. Robert X's drowning suicide is final evidence of his state of despair, not a critique of Christianity. Nash argues that Martin's wavering

between denying faith and embracing it “suggests the weakness of what is supposed to be his support system” (357). However, Martin’s wavering represents his coming to terms with Robert X’s death and his own shortcomings. Nash overlooks the powerful assessment of religious faith that Martin makes at the novel’s close:

“I was an animal before I was Reverend Phillip J. Martin. I was an animal. He changed me to a man. He straightened my back. He raised my head. He gave me feelings, compassion, made me responsible for my fellow man. My back wasn’t straightened before He straightened it. . . . I was ready to get the first blow, what I’ve received many, many times. But I kept going, kept going. ‘Cause of Him. ‘Cause of Him. ‘Cause of Him I’ve been running after my son. I never woulda done it if it wasn’t for Him.” (211-12)

Martin also refers to this animalistic nature to explain his inability to stand upon seeing Robert X in his home: “I had arms, but I couldn’t lift them to you. It took a man to do these things, and I wasn’t a man. I was just some other brutish animal who could cheat, steal, rob, kill—but not stand” (102). Martin views Christianity as a requirement to achieve and maintain manhood. Without it, he is a mere brute, incapable of controlling the desires of the flesh, which resulted in his inappropriate behavior in the past. Martin’s declaration contradicts Plant’s assertion that the “God he serves is powerless to deliver him from his past, and equally powerless to effect desired change in his present and immediate future” (16). Alone, Martin engages in self- assessment, but it is guided by his belief in the power of God. However, Martin’s successes--establishing manhood, reconnecting with his wife, and acknowledging all his children ““Not Robert. Not X. Etienne. Etienne Martin. And Antoine Martin, and Justine Martin”” (203)--all result from his reconnection to his faith.

Evident in the narrative is yet another biblical allusion in the reworking of the prodigal son parable. In a typical Gainesian reversal, the father (Martin) and not the son (Robert X) engages in riotous behavior and then returns home. In the Christian parable, the son is forgiven for his many transgressions, and the family celebrates his return. The moral principle relayed is God's forgiveness for sin and acceptance of those who stray and then repent. Basically, Martin is due like treatment, for he is truly repentant by the end of his journey. Again Gaines incorporates a component of Christianity into his fiction as a pattern for his characters' behavior. The lesson attained from Gaines' reworking is the same as the lesson presented by scripture.

As Martin continues his odyssey to confront his past, Gaines adds yet another twist. Peters, an elderly preacher, establishes a dialogue during one of Martin's moments of introspection, this time at a diner. Valkeakari calls Peters "a pathetic elderly preacher, only capable of parroting religious clichés, who prefigures for Phillip what he himself might later become" (139). Likewise, Babb refers to Peters's rhetoric as a "sham of spiritual leadership" and "ineffectual religious platitudes" (105). However, such characterizations understate Peters's role in the narrative. The elderly preacher actually serves two significant purposes.

First, he represents one of the many aspects of the past that Martin re-evaluates on his retrospective journey. As Martin searches for his friend Chipppo Simon to gather information about the family he abandoned, the experience reintroduces Martin to all the ghosts of his past in Baton Rouge. He travels up and down streets and inside establishments where he and Chipppo used to gamble, dance, womanize, and fight. Peters

is as significant as the other characters with whom Martin interacts: Angelina Bouie, his godmother whose intuitive words initiate the journey; Billy, the revolutionary whose life parallels Robert X's; Po Boy, the gambler who reminds Martin of his younger self; and Adeline Touissant, Martin's former lover. All make Martin aware of his shortcomings and define the purpose of his search: "'Just something I shoulda done when I was that age,' he said. 'And I wouldn'ta been here tonight'" (179). Though Martin's search for Chippo appears haphazard, there is enough evidence to suggest divine intervention at play. With each interaction, Martin comments on or is reminded of the presence of Christianity. For instance, Martin's godmother christened both Martin and Etienne. After listening to Billy's tirade about separation within the church, Martin reminds Billy that despite the many obstacles, God spared Billy's life and granted the former soldier certain talents for a reason. Martin enjoins him to use his spiritual gift to help the people. Po Boy calls on God to help him win. And finally, Adeline recalls her earlier surprise when Martin became a preacher and abandoned his sinful lifestyle. The common element is that each character is essential to Martin's reestablishment of a sense of purpose, one grounded in religion. Peters serves the same role, a connection from the path from whom Martin gleans a lesson.

Specifically, Peters represents preachers and religion of Martin's past. Gaines connects Peters with the past to establish him as a witness to the changing social element: "He looked at the things the way you look at them when you have seen them many, many times before" (152). The preacher is seventy or eighty, and his wrinkled old Bible represents years of use. Gaines includes Peters's Bible in the senior's description as if it

is part of his wardrobe and adds that he holds his coffee cup like a chalice, further evidence of the man's connection to Christianity. When the café owner repeatedly warns Peters that the establishment is not a church, her tone suggests that he is a constant "relay" of the Word—a common characteristic of elderly Christians. Thus, Peters's commitment to his calling serves to remind Martin of the growing distance between him and his followers. Furthermore, as a good preacher, Peters illustrates the keen insight of one conditioned to recognize nuances of human nature when he questions Martin: "'You look like a man of the Gospel'" (151). As the men converse, Peters reads Martin's face, intuitively finding answers to his own questions regarding Martin's quest. Only attributes of age render Peters less effective as a preacher, not Christianity itself. Valkeakari and Babb dismiss Peters's worth to the narrative because he quotes scriptural passages as responses to Martin's comments. However, the religious sentiments "Keep the faith" and "We all have a friend" are the ones he probably retained from constant usage, for they represent the foundations of faith, lessons that Martin has cast aside.

The second purpose for Peters, in the role of religious father figure for Martin, is to force Martin to realize the error of his interaction with Robert X. Martin's parting thought to his son, "'There's father,' Phillip said. 'There's God and law. Always was. Always will be'" (104) mirrors Martin's dialogue with Peters. Phillips, at this time, cannot present his argument in a way that makes rational sense to Robert X. Likewise, Peters refuses to acknowledge the ramifications of racial disharmony or the gap between fathers and sons that Martin clings to as justification for his disregard of his families. In an interview with Charles Rowell, Gaines discusses how slavery separated black families.

The author laments the fact that the separation remains in modern day, and fathers and sons will never be reunited philosophically (87). However, this theory, which Gaines incorporates into the novel, does not serve as adequate defense for Martin's neglect of his older children. Thus, Peters turns the same deaf ear to Martin that Martin has turned to his first family for many years. Gaines sets up an identical dynamic before Martin begins his quest. As Martin attempts to perform the prayer he has said each day since his conversion, he pauses to question God, "'Why? Why? Why? Is this punishment for my past?'" (69). The response, if it is to be deemed spiritual muteness, is a temporary one designed to evoke self assessment: "The thorn-crowned, twisted, bleeding body of Christ hung on the cross, mute" (69). Christianity has not failed here. Martin must evaluate the answers that lie before him. I agree with Valkeakari that "Gaines does not, however, typically absolve his characters from individual responsibility (no matter how heavy the burden of history unfairly placed on their shoulders)" (135). Therefore, Reverend Peters's "deafness" is Martin's prompt to continue his self-assessment and mend his broken family units, after acknowledging Peters's contribution: "I'm glad we met" (155).

Martin's spiritual and physical journey will end only when he realizes his prayers to forget the past were inappropriate and nonredemptive. Instead, he must accept his complicity in all of the personal shortcomings and failings that he has imposed upon his families. Throughout the text, Martin hides behind the biblical principles of forgiveness and doing good work: "'But I asked forgiveness for my past. And You've forgiven me for my past'" (69). However, he overlooks the Christian principle of paying the wages of sin and the mistake of equating work and faithfulness: "For by grace are ye saved through

faith . . . not of works lest any man should boast” (Eph 2: 8-9). Gaines does not ennoble Martin by associating him with goodness. Furthermore, Martin realizes that placing the blame for the separation between him and Robert X on slavery and, after Robert X dies, on God is also invalid. Martin asserts another ego-defense mechanism to assuage his guilt, stating that it is best not to have faith: ““That way you never get hurt”” (210). Alma, his wife, knows Martin best and counters, ““You’ve been hurt bad. But a man like you can’t lose faith that easily”” (211). Alma voices a common truth. Faith for Martin, like faith for all of Gaines’ professed atheists and agnostics, is still in place even when the characters struggle against it.

Because of the novel’s final scene, Gaines explains that readers often criticize the book, suggesting that it is incomplete (Rickels 129). However, the story is complete if considered as the culmination of a spiritual journey for redemption. Martin stands as a newborn Christian, ready to begin anew. Alma’s concluding statement, ““We just go’n have to start again”” is all inclusive, encompassing his family, his communal obligations, and most importantly, their religious fervor. Martin’s restoration establishes him as the redeemed prodigal son once he finds his way home. His ““I’m lost, Alma. I’m lost”” (214) now translates to “He was lost, and is found” (Luke 16: 24).

Simply stated, Gaines’ preacher personas steadfastly accept and execute their roles as God’s messengers: ““Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim 4:2). Those such as Reverend Phillip Martin, who may lose their way, use that same religious fortitude to find their way back to the comfort of faith. Though Gaines frequently casts his preachers in

circumstances in which their beliefs and actions appear ineffective, these are the moments in which the men showcase the rewards of diligence to faith. Theologian Joseph Johnson emphasizes the strength and industry of the preacher collective:

He exerted and lost himself in acts of service, of love and devotion to members of the black witnessing community, visiting those who were cast into prison, bringing words of comfort to those who mourned. He won his soul through the sermons he preached, the hymns he sang, the scripture he read, and the prayers he prayed. He developed soul—the tenderness, the capacity to suffer with those who were afflicted. He developed his soul through his tears, his anguish, his agony as he fought to bring the good news of the kingdom of God to a disinherited and dispossessed people. And what a soul he developed! (16)

With the depictions of his preacher characters, Gaines makes the statement that the black preacher continues to persevere as an active agent for change in the community. It is simply impossible to dismiss hundreds of years of accomplishments because of a period of disfavor. Gaines does not attempt to create a “typical” black preacher, for none exist. He does, however, present black preachers as passionate beings worthy of respect.

CHAPTER III
THE PREACHER-SCHOLAR DEBATE

“It is better to debate a question without settling it, than to settle it without debate.”
Joseph
*Joubert*¹⁷

“Religion is not an intellectual test, but a faith.”
*E.W. Howe*¹⁸

A prominent reoccurrence in Gaines’s literature is the preacher-versus-scholar polemic. The primary conflict is a battle between religious identity and African-American male identity. The problem exists because many of Gaines’s preachers firmly adhere to traditional Christian tenets while his scholars reject Christianity, generally viewing it as impractical or hindering in the struggle for racial equality. The exceptions to this either-or fallacy that results in mistrust and antagonism on both sides are Reverend Armstrong of *Catherine Carmier*, who supports the scholar Jackson Bradley, and Reverend Ambrose and local school teacher Grant Wiggins of *A Lesson Before Dying*, who eventually forge a unified agenda to assist a convicted youth. Within the conflict lies an allusion to DuBois’s notion of “double consciousness,” the quest to reconcile blackness and Americaness. DuBois refers to the duality as “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. . . . this longing to attain self conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes

¹⁷ “Number 115,” *Penses*. Quoted in *The Macmillan Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases*, p. 528.

¹⁸ *Sinner Sermons*. p. 10.

neither of the older selves to be lost” (38-39). The circumstance of Gaines’s scholars is similar. As young adults, many struggle against the Christian indoctrination of their childhood yet are unable to wrench themselves free of the ingrained belief system. The educated young men frequently oppose any form of religion, but their diatribes often emerge as veiled efforts to not betray suppressed or repressed DuBoisian “unreconciled strivings.” Since they do not absolutely break from Christianity, their self development is thwarted, lacking salient features of their African-American identity or their manhood. In other words, most of the young men remain conflicted, opposed not to Christianity, but to institutionalized “old-time” religion.¹⁹ The resolution to their dilemma lies in finding a viable middle ground.

Pitting the preachers against the scholars, Gaines presents strong characters who obstinately argue both sides of the pressing question, asking if one can effectively battle social inequality while maintaining Christian principles. Nash argues that Gaines sets up conflict between ministers and militants and “consistently resolves it in favor of the younger generation” (346). However, to simply accept the notion that the scholars win each of these debates against seemingly inept, misguided preachers overlooks the lessons underlying the preachers’ discourse. Regarding one such debate in “The Sky is Gray,” Shelton suggests that both the student and the preacher “seem to address inadequately the concrete realities of [the] situation” (204). Basically, this circumstance exists in all the debates as Gaines gradually allows his preachers and scholars to find a common ground.

¹⁹ In “Youth, the Ministry, and the Church” from *The Black Preacher in America* (1972), Charles Hamilton analyzes predominant attitudes of black youths toward preachers and the church. Hamilton suggests that youth, driven by fear, uncertainty, and frustration, are turning to religion but not to orthodox religion.

Though the scholars' dominant postures suggest otherwise, Gaines asserts no outright winner. Gaines' four preacher-scholar pairings form a gamut ranging from non-constructive to ideal, beginning with the preacher and scholar of "The Sky is Gray" and culminating with Reverend Ambrose and Grant of *A Lesson Before Dying*. As the preachers and scholars mature, Gaines lays the foundation for positive outcome guided by Christian values. The author relies upon real-life debates as the model for his characters. During the Civil Rights Movement, many young blacks charged that the church hindered liberation efforts because church leaders often attempted "nonconfrontational negotiations" with whites and did not support revolution. However, some clergy such as Adam Clayton Powell organized boycotts and picketed businesses. Other black preachers used their churches as mobilization points for mass meetings and demonstrations, and church members fed and housed civil rights workers (Lincoln and Mamiya 210-12).²⁰ By engaging his preachers and scholars in debate, Gaines proves that neither side can formulate or vocalize a salubrious solution to societal ills without a joint effort. Reverend Armstrong engages in no debate with Jackson, the novel's scholar, because Armstrong has realized the need for productive duty from both the religious-minded and the educated in the common cause as illustrated in the aforementioned discussion with Jackson's Aunt Charlotte. As the many debates ensue, Gaines embraces Christianity by highlighting the scholars' completely flawed or underdeveloped knowledge regarding it. Likewise, he acknowledges the role intellectuals play in the

²⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya's research data indicates that among seven black denominations representing 80 percent of all Christians, 91.6 percent of the clergy advocated proactive involvement in social and political problems during the Civil Rights Movement (213).

struggle for societal equality. Gaines presents the ideal resolution in *A Lesson Before Dying* when the men acknowledge the strength and necessity of both groups in effecting communal growth and progress.

At one extreme is the conflict that occurs in “The Sky is Gray” in a dentist’s office. Gaines uses a preacher and a scholar (who both remain nameless) to demonstrate the least mature of his groupings. Each refuses to deviate from his established mindset: the scholar sees no value in religion, and the preacher refuses to agitate even though circumstances appear dire. Several people, including James, the story’s impressionable young narrator, serve as judge and jury for the debate. Gaines uses the boy’s trip to the substandard dentist to illustrate social inequalities enforced by Jim Crow standards: James and his mother must ride in the back of the bus, pass a segregated school and restaurant, and acknowledge the Confederate flag flying above the courthouse. They visit the dentist by necessity; he is the only one whom blacks can afford. When a woman comments on the suffering the patients must endure, the preacher offers a conciliatory comment:

“I often wonder why the Lord let a child like that suffer,” a lady say to mama.
“Not us to question,” a man says. . . .
“And looks like it’s the poor who suffers the most,” she says. “I don’t understand it.”
“Best not to even try,” the preacher says. “He works in mysterious ways—wonders to perform.” (94-95)

The preacher relies only on scriptural text for explanation because he has no concrete answers that will satisfy those who look to religion as a source of comfort. He represents the group of preachers whom Martin Luther King, Jr. criticized as “having been tempted

by the enticing cult of conformity” and who “avoid saying anything from the pulpit which might disturb the respectable views of the comfortable members of [their] congregations” (*Strength to Love* 25). Such practices caused youths such as Gaines’s scholar to challenge the effectiveness of the church and Christianity. The student initiates a verbal assault, referring to the preacher and those who follow Christianity as ignorant. When the angered preacher strikes the scholar, the young man, in turn, resorts to a scriptural-based response which heightens the insult: ““You forgot the other cheek”” (98). Luscher incorrectly concludes that the student “shows himself to be an exemplary Christian by literally turning the other cheek” (“Visionary” 75), for the scripture that the student references is an enjoinder from Jesus to the multitudes rebuking, not inciting retaliation as a means to resist evil. Instead, the student uses the scripture to mock and humiliate the preacher. Both the preacher and the scholar lose focus of the common dilemma facing all the patients because the men’s differing opinions compel them to view each other as adversaries.

The scholar appears to have won by default; however, he soon reveals that he is just as hopeless as the preacher in offering a viable solution to the problem. With the preacher’s absence, the scholar has the floor to make his “pitch” to a captive audience. Nash concludes that James must accept that the “student’s way is more useful to him than the minister’s” (353). Likewise, Luscher establishes the scholar as the voice of reason, suggesting the scholar’s logic easily overcomes the preacher’s “shallow injunctions” (“Pulse” 78). The critics, though, do not consider the fallibility of rhetoric that confounds the very audience it is meant to enlighten. The student’s elevated, metaphorical language

only alienates him from the masses, rendering his diatribe ineffective and precipitates his own fall. When a female patient asks the youth why he does not believe in God, he resumes his tactic of questioning and challenging everything handed to him by society and responds, ““Because the wind is pink”” (100) and then ignores her. Next, the scholar offers the crux of his argument: ““Words mean nothing. Action is the only thing. Doing. That’s the only thing”” (101). The point is valid, yet the scholar stirs no one to action. Instead, he uses words (the constant against which he rebels) to further confound them, so he becomes the object of their mirth. One patient even notes that she has switched sympathies: ““I didn’t go ‘long with that preacher at first . . . but now—I don’t know. When a person say the grass is black, he’s either a lunatic or something’s wrong”” (101).

Even though the preacher has exited, Gaines still inserts discussion of Christianity into the scene, forcing the student to acknowledge religion’s role in the fight for equality. After the student insists times are changing because of black men who favor brain over heart, one patient questions these men’s belief in God. The scholar admits, ““I’m sure some of them do. Maybe most of them do”” (102). The scholar loses more ground when he attempts to define the parameters of the activists’ faith: ““But they don’t believe that God is going to touch these white people’s hearts and change things tomorrow”” (102). The argument loses merit, for if what he says is indeed true, he needs to provide some explanation for the activists’ indomitable belief. The anti-Christianity argument continues to lose momentum when the scholar offers hope for a future generation of believers. He hopes those who follow him will have faith, ““if not in [the patients’] God, then in something else, something definitely that they can believe in”” (102). Defeated, the

scholar ends his argument using the same line, but this time it rings of defeat: “‘I haven’t anything. For me, the wind is pink, the grass is black’” (102). Considered thusly, it is not only the patients who appear ridiculous as Lee Papa asserts (188), but also the educated man.

The student is not victorious. Roberts suggests that “‘through his [the preacher’s] action, he admits that the emotional or ‘heart’ position leads to a cul de sac; it cannot be defended rationally. On the other hand, the student maintains a defensible position, but his egotistical stance exposes his feelings of alienation from community” (112). However, the student does not “‘maintain” his argument. It falters immediately, just as the preacher’s does. Gaines uses this preacher and scholar to demonstrate the bifurcation of ideas regarding productive measures to achieve equality. As the actual equal rights protests proved, agitation, along with church-driven movements, precipitated change. By leaving both men in the short story nameless, Gaines makes a profound statement regarding their positions; their way is the wrong way.

In the novel *In My Father’s House*, Gaines creates more mature versions of the preacher and scholar of “The Sky is Gray.” Phillip Martin (preacher) and Jonathan Robillard (scholar) engage in the prominent debate concerning strides toward civil rights; however, they, too, fall short of the ideal personal connection. The novel offers a compelling preacher-scholar debate since Robillard is also a preacher. The young man should, for all intents and purposes, reconcile his religiosity and his quest for civil rights. Gaines’s assignment of dual roles for Robillard prompts consideration of the emerging conflict between black nationalists and the civil rights advocates who adhered to the King

doctrine of nonviolent protest. Historians Randall Burkett and Richard Newman highlight the essence of the conflict:

The Negro militants are at the point where they must take some calculated risks. If they give up non-violence for a self-protection they feel is more manly, they may alienate their pacifist and religiously oriented support. If they encourage the indigenous Negro leadership which they have been chided for not producing, they may alienate sincerer white liberals (and their money) who are insensitive to the inherent culture-produced condescending superiority of any white face. If they sacrifice integration as the movement's immediate goal and substitute black power (even as a device for achieving real integration in the long run) they may alienate supporters who are humanistically motivated and repelled by tough-minded practicalities. (7)

Theologian James Cones notes that young black preachers also experienced an existential dilemma. Their faith was similar to that of King, but their politics resembled that of radicals such as Stokely Carmichael. Torn between their respect for King and the appeal of “by any means necessary” liberation politics, many of the young preachers opted to no longer embrace nonviolence as an ideology (“Black Theology” 181). Gaines’s adherence to verisimilitude results in a similar paradoxical conundrum for Robillard. The young preacher symbolizes the militants of groups such as the Black Muslims, Black Panthers, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which changed its name to the Student National Coordinating Committee when a consensus of the members suggested its nonviolent stance was no longer productive. The phrase “Black Power” replaced “Freedom now,” and “We shall overrun” supplanted “We shall overcome” (Cone, “Black Theology” 181). Mimicking his real-life counterparts, Robillard emerges as angry activist. Robillard never references Christianity in his plans to serve as leader of the St. Adrienne Civil Rights Committee, which Martin has successfully chaired for years. In

presenting a realistic depiction of Robillard, Gaines critiques his activist's real-life counterparts. Robillard's refusal to listen renders him ineffective both as a pastor and, most importantly, a civil-rights activist. Historian William Banks adds, "Most mainstream civil rights leaders accepted the idea that moral suasion and education would bring about racial equality" (135). Thus, Robillard's program for reform is doomed at inception and serves as evidence that Gaines is not promoting the scholar over the preacher.

Though Gaines highlights Robillard's shortcomings, Reverend Martin does not escape reproof. Martin's offers valid leadership advice to Robillard; however, Martin's past sins overshadow it, causing a disconnect between the two men. All the men on the St. Adrienne Civil Rights Committee agree that Martin, attempting to save his own son, should not have made the deal with Nolan to cancel the march against Chenal, the racist businessman. Robillard, though, expresses a deep-seated resentment, glaring at Martin with disgust. Unimpressed by Martin's previous political accomplishments, Robillard calls the meeting to vote Martin out as president, and he will replace Martin. Martin imparts to the young pastor that he is not as prepared for the challenge as he may think:

"But you go'n find that bravery ain't all. Knowing when to move and what to say is just as important. And, boy, you got a lot to learn. Not just about white people, which takes more than eight years; you got a lot to learn about your own people. You don't even know nothing about them yet. . . .

"You'll break that Chenal, boy, I have no doubt of that," Phillip said. "But you go'n always have a Chenal. I have no doubt that one day you'll even be a Chenal." (131-32)

Gaines casts Robillard in the same circumstance as the youth from “The Sky is Gray.” He possesses the wisdom and the drive to combat the system, but he lacks the vision that connects him to parishioners, the connection that previously assured Martin success:

“Jonathan is that new breed. . . . He thinks education, big words, is all you need to communicate. He’ll have to learn he must break them big words down to reach his people. They all right in school, but not in that church, and not out there on the street either.” (56)

Robillard, to his detriment, is unable to reconcile his religious faith and training and his quest for civil rights. Again, Gaines does not assert the scholar as victor in the debate even though Martin loses his position on the committee. Though Robillard’s accentuated self-regard will not allow him to acknowledge it, Gaines makes it implicit that Robillard is certain to experience his own fall, one with even more negative outcomes than Martin’s. With Robillard’s behavior, Gaines illustrates that such power wielded by those unready to lead precipitates disaster.²¹

The preacher-scholar dissension that occurs in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* illustrates a growing maturity in Gaines’s debaters beyond that of Martin and Robillard’s. For example, Jimmy Aaron engages in debate with Elder Banks, the local preacher, and Just Cause, the head deacon, but the men do not exhibit the mutual disrespect exhibited by the men in *In My Father’s House*. With this interaction, Gaines moves closer to the ideal preacher-scholar relationship. Without demeaning either side,

²¹ In a 1958 speech “Three Responses of Oppressed Groups,” Martin Luther King, Jr. devised a plan of unity for disagreeing civil-rights factions: “If the Negro is to achieve the goal of integration, he must organize himself into a militant and nonviolent mass movement. All three elements are indispensable. The movement for equality and justice can only be a success if it has both a mass and militant character; the barriers to be overcome require both” (120-121).

Gaines details movement toward preacher-scholar conciliation designed to foster productivity in combating social inequalities. Christianity, however, serves as the primary impetus for the opponents' reconciliation in the novel. Jane Pittman and her neighbors on the plantation designate Jimmy Aaron as "the One." The religious significance of the title means Jimmy is destined to champion his people, suggestive of the collective's focus on both church and politics. Like many of Gaines's scholars, after Jimmy returns from college, he proclaims he no longer cares for the church. Jimmy continues to pray in the church, but Jane describes it as "too dry now, too educated" (230).²² Jimmy appears to be merely going through the motions for his family's sake.

Jimmy's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement instigates another reunion with his church family. Initially, Jimmy cannot help the blacks on the Samson plantation overcome their fears of white reprisal because he does not tap into the source of their strength—religion. A superficial reading of the scene suggests the church leaders who oppose Jimmy are not only fearful, but also ignorant. Giles suggests that the congregation's "devotion to a warped Christianity" prevents the members from accepting Jimmy's message (47). However, Giles overlooks the standing demarcation between the private and public spirituality of black congregants. The bifurcation allows them to maintain their personal Christian lifestyles along with their public commitment to social and political activism. Furthermore, throughout the novel, Jane Pittman serves as the recorder of black life in America; she is a former slave and is later involved in the Civil

²² Henry Mitchell reveals in his sociological study *Black Preaching* (1970) that Black-culture churches offered the choice of a pastor who had good communication skills or one who was merely educated chose the former. Congregations questioned whether the educated men who tried to "preach white" to them were even "saved." The educated men's inability to relate to parishioners frequently leads to misunderstandings, so sincere efforts are thwarted by the absence of cultural integrity crucial to black identity (150).

Rights Movement. Through Jane, Gaines has already provided details that counter Giles' conclusion. Prior to Jimmy's return, Jane recalls true acts of bravery: a black woman who is disfigured during the protests and little children who participate as they are threatened by dogs and white mobs: "Cussed them little children and still they went. Threwed rocks and bricks at them and still they stood up" (231). The church members that Giles derides engage in a similar act of bravery made more so heroic because they are indebted to whites for their livelihood: "'Reverend King and his people owned things in Georgia and Alabama. We don't own a thing. Some of us don't even own the furniture in our house'" (239). The church members' initial fear regarding protest is not a result of adherence to Christianity, but justified concern that agitation will result in homelessness. Thus, Gaines is not illustrating shortcomings of the church and its members with the incorporation of their concerns; instead, it is an opportunity to promote the congregants who responded to civic duty despite such concerns. Therefore, Gaines's characters' eventual support of Jimmy in spite of such dire consequences is proof of courage inspired by religious fortitude.

With Jimmy's return to the church, Gaines's storylines meld again. Jimmy faces the same disconnect from community as the scholar in "The Sky is Gray" and Jonathan Robillard. His primary problem is also language barrier. The difference between Jimmy and the other scholars, though, is that Jimmy transitions from usage of scholarly, secular language to the language of Christian reverence. Significantly, only when Jimmy acknowledges the power of Christian belief does the divide begin to close:

“I don’t go to church no more,” Jimmy said, “because I lost faith in God. And even now I don’t feel worthy standing here before y’all. I don’t feel worthy because I’m so weak. And I’m here because you are strong. I need you because my body is not strong enough to stand out there all by myself. Some people carry flags, but we don’t have a flag. Some carry guns, but we know it would be nonsense to even think about that. Some have money, but we don’t have a cent. We have just the strength of our people, our Christian people. That’s why I’m here. I left the church, but that don’t mean I left my people. . . . But still we need your strength, we need your prayers, we need you to stand by us because we have no other roots.” (237-40)

Jimmy’s statements contradict the notion that religion fails in the novel. He even offers self-contradiction. Jimmy has not lost his faith; he merely loses his connection to it once he ventures into academia. Jimmy acknowledges that religion has not mired the congregation in ignorance of the changing tide of society; instead, it has sustained them through it as a viable source of strength. Definitive proof of that strength prevails as the church members attend a protest rally after Jimmy’s assassination. Where the scholar of “The Sky is Gray” and Robillard fail, Jimmy prevails even in death because he fully accepts the need for and the power of Christian faith.

Building upon the preacher-scholar relationship that develops between Jimmy and Elder Banks, Gaines’s most extensive treatment of the preacher-scholar debate appears in his 1993 novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*. The conflict between scholar Grant Wiggins and Reverend Ambrose evolves throughout the novel and culminates in a symbiotic relationship that sets the standard for all such interactions. Grant, like Jimmy and Jackson, has severed ties to his Christian faith; however, with this character, Gaines paradoxically promotes religion by asserting its value through Grant, who is an unwilling conduit as a professed nonbeliever. To establish Grant and Ambrose as the ideal

preacher-scholar relationship, Gaines works through the intellectual's rejection of faith and restores a God figure whom Grant can embrace and revere. Though Grant denies the power of Christianity until the novel's close, his revelation in the final chapters attests to Gaines' promotion of Christianity as a necessity in establishing wholeness, a complete man.

The two men share the responsibility of establishing a sense of manhood in Jefferson, a black youth who is sentenced to death by electrocution for a crime he does not commit. In his closing arguments, the defense attorney likens putting Jefferson in the electric chair to putting a hog there. The attorney's defense degrades the youth as animalistic and without the mental ability to reason, read, or even be taught, good only for the performance of manual labor. Jefferson's godmother, Emma, accepts the guilty plea, but she cannot accept the notion of Jefferson believing, as he dies, that he is not a man, but a hog. Emma elicits the aid of both Reverend Mose Ambrose and Grant Wiggins to facilitate psychological change in Jefferson before his impending death. Emma arranges for Grant to visit Jefferson in prison, and she makes trips there with the minister, conducting what the sheriff describes as "time for teacher and preacher" (48), parallel rhetoric foreshadowing the equal importance of the two groups. Emma is both religious and intelligent (though not formally educated) and realizes the necessity of a combined effort from both categories of male leadership in achieving her goal. Emma's reasoning expands beyond the novel, punctuating a means for the black community to promote black unity in a stance against white hegemony and discrimination.

Some critics have commented on Ambrose's positive qualities, even setting him apart from Gaines's other preachers. Babb argues that though Ambrose's knowledge appears impotent, "it is cast as the bedrock of the dignity Grant seeks to instill in Jefferson" ("Old-Fashioned Modernism" 258). Doyle states that he is "a minister who (at last) is neither a fool nor a knave" (204-05). In a brief mention, Baker calls Armstrong a "healer for the community's grief" who helps churchgoers "find meaning in a seemingly meaningless world" (120). Likewise, Nash argues that Ambrose is a "tenacious, devoted servant who can truly minister to the community's needs" (348), and Karen Carmean mentions Ambrose's "self-sacrifice for the good of the whole" (124). Since the critics have acknowledged Ambrose's worth, my discussion will focus primarily on the ways Gaines uses the two men to promote a positive Christianity as they interact and aspects of Ambrose's character overlooked by critics.

Initially, Grant is not prepared to accept the challenge to work with Ambrose. Grant returns from the university and announces to Tante Lou, his aunt and guardian, that he no longer believes. Though he professes a loss of faith, Grant's declaration is not wholly convincing. Gaines undoes Grant's mindset through a gradual reintroduction to Christian concepts. First of all, Grant's residence in the parish with his religious-minded aunt compels him to confront Christian concepts almost daily as Gaines frequently interrupts the teacher's meditative moments. For instance, Tante Lou practices her Termination song for five hours prior to church while Grant attempts to grade schoolwork. Determination Sunday is a time for believers to profess where they would spend eternity, a concept that Grant is compelled to consider. Additionally, the sound of

singing from the church continuously disrupts Grant's concentration. Grant reminisces, "I had been hearing it all my life, all my life" (102). Gaines's use of repetition reinforces the notion of religious permanence, a factor his characters cannot escape. Gaines, likewise, intrudes upon the secular world into which Grant wishes to escape with his girlfriend Vivian, thereby further promoting the predominance of the religious calling that Grant battles. On one occasion, Grant attempts avoidance by walking with Vivian through the quarter, but the "entire plantation was deadly quiet except for the singing coming from the church" (107). Vivian, whom Grant intends to marry, knows him best and insists, "I know you believe. . . . You don't want to, but I know you do" (105). Grant counteracts with the secular "The only thing I believe in is loving you," but his challenge consists of rhetoric designed to change the serious tone of the discussion and end it, evidence of further avoidance. Grant explains his dilemma as "running in place . . . unable to accept what used to be my life, unable to change it" (102). Grant's dilemma is reminiscent of the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The young man, struggling with one race dilemma after another, "runs" throughout the novel seeking focus. Gaines, however, will not allow Grant to remain in such limbo, for the scholar's immersion into Christianity continues as the novel unfolds.

Reverend Ambrose's role as teacher and preacher is a prominent factor in Grant's new vision regarding Christianity. Ambrose and Grant engage in several battles as they yield to Emma's desire to transform Jefferson. Ambrose addresses their common bond, despite their seemingly opposing agendas: "Even with book learning, we were still fools if we did not have God in our hearts" (150). The men's verbal debate regarding education

is reminiscent of the scene in “The Sky is Gray.” Grant’s college education has prepared him to teach “reading, writing, and arithmetic” (215), but not how to recognize or respond to the needs of the average black citizen, the type of education that Ambrose has acquired and teaches Grant. Ambrose’s stance is not the unquestioning religious conformist type exhibited by the preacher in “The Sky is Gray” but a modernist attitude that appeals to a broader audience. Also, Grant’s level of maturity exceeds that of the scholar of the short story. Questioning is a prominent characteristic of an intellectual. The scholar of “The Sky is Gray” questions but finds no answers, so he continues to speak in abstractions. Contrarily, Grant finds answers because he learns and grows from his interaction with Ambrose.

The concept of God vexes Grant; thus Gaines uses Ambrose to define God as well as provide a purpose for Him. When Emma first presents Grant with her proposition to restore Jefferson’s self-esteem, he queries, “I’m supposed to make him a man. Who am I? God?” (31). Later, angered by the notice of Jefferson’s execution date, Grant demands answers: “How do people come up with a date and a time to take another life from another man? Who made them God?” (157). Grant’s interaction with Ambrose results in epiphany for the scholar: “He [Ambrose] is going to use *their* God to give him strength” (249). Ambrose appropriates God as a source of love, justice, and equality for all humans, not just the dominant culture. Christianity, in its truest form, allows men to recreate or redefine themselves. Grant’s distrust of Christianity results from his vision of it as the “white man’s God.” His presumptions slowly dissipate through his continuing association with believers. Grant finally admits that he is not firm in his claim of faithlessness: “I

believe in God, Reverend,' I said. . . . 'I believe in God. Every day of my life I believe in God'" (214) and concedes to Ambrose's insistence that Jefferson needs to hear about God. Furthermore, Grant finally acknowledges the role of both religion and education in shaping the whole man: "I was just thinking maybe I could bring you a little notebook and a pencil. You could write your thoughts down, and we could talk about it when I come back. Or maybe you could talk to Reverend Ambrose about it when he came to visit you'" (185). I disagree with critic Akiko Ochiai who sees no positive message at the novel's end because Jefferson will die, and Grant has just begun self exploration. She concludes that "mutual understanding and support between Reverend Ambrose and Grant seems impossible without further painful confrontation" (45). Instead, Grant and Ambrose have worked through the "painful confrontation" that has previously divided them and can combine their efforts to save the other youths whom Grant teaches from downfall such as Jefferson's. Although Grant cannot fully embrace Christian tenets embraced by Ambrose, Emma, and Tante Lou, he will not attempt to convince Jefferson and other youths that religion and prayer are futile, for he now acknowledges their value. Grant realizes he and Reverend Ambrose share a common burden. Both men are equally hindered by a racist system as indicated by Gaines's incorporation of additional parallel rhetoric: "He [Sheriff] calls me Professor, but he doesn't mean it. He calls Reverend Ambrose Reverend, but he doesn't respect him'" (192). Grant learns that both men face adversarial agents in society, but they have the same life mission: to serve others in both secular and sacred arenas.

To further develop Grant's gradual return to Christianity, Gaines conflates the roles of his preacher and scholar. In *Voices From the Quarters*, Doyle devotes a chapter to the many teachers of *A Lesson Before Dying*; however, she does not address Ambrose as one. Similarly, though David Vancil discusses Christian beliefs in the novel, he gives Grant sole credit for Jefferson's renewal without once mentioning Ambrose. Ambrose's role as teacher begins when he gives Grant the first lesson on their commonalities, which compels Grant to acknowledge the role each plays in society and in Jefferson's life. The first shared trait is that both men are liars. Ambrose lies at weddings and at wakes and funerals to relieve pain. Grant lies to Miss Emma and others to relieve pain. For the two, the lie is not necessarily a sin or a shortcoming, but a means to uplift, to empower. Beavers explains, "Ambrose suggests that faith is indeed a form of lying, for it proposes that lives characterized by despair and degradation hinge upon the ability to imagine and articulate better circumstances even in the very midst of trouble" (177). Comparatively, Ambrose's explanation of the need to lie removes the negative image of the preacher presented in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Jane contends that old people need their spirits uplifted occasionally and wants a local youth to alter bad news in the newspaper. He replies, "I ain't no preacher. Let preachers tell them lies'" (217). Jane categorizes the boy as evil because he will never tailor the truth to make the elders feel better. Thus, the preachers' lies are, by virtue of contrast, forms of good. Presenting lying as a positive concept is yet another example of Gaines's brand of rhetorical manipulation. Establishing the concept of "bearing false witness" as acceptable appears to contradict

religious dogma; however, the utilitarian approach of using the lie to promote a virtue diminishes the negativity associated with lying under such circumstances.

Ambrose also serves as teacher as Grant wrestles with humanity, seeking a form of Christianity he can embrace. Previously, Grant has just been going through the motions: having the children recite Bible verses, reminding them of the birth of Jesus, and directing the Christmas pageant each year. Grant's conflict is compounded by his fear of imposing his "unreconciled strivings" upon the next generation: "Don't tell me to believe. Don't tell me to believe in the same God or laws that men believe in who commit these murders. Don't tell me to believe that God can bless this country and that men are judged by their peers . . . Yet they must believe" (252). However, because of his interaction with Ambrose, Grant significantly softens his anti-religion stance as he grows along with Jefferson. During a meal at the jail, Grant is embarrassed when he begins to eat while Jefferson waits with a bowed head. Though the prayer is more ritual for Jefferson than personal desire, Grant follows suit: "I bowed my head and made the sign of the cross and asked God to bless the food" (208). Grant's soul searching ultimately reveals that he has lost faith in man, not Christianity.

Through Ambrose's presence and insistence, Gaines strategically sets the stage to present a modern rendering of the Christian God, one who is not usually apparent to black men in society such as Grant. Grant shares his newfound perception with Jefferson: "I think it's God that makes people care for people, Jefferson. I think it's God makes children play and people sing. I believe it's God that brings loved one's together. I believe it's God that makes trees bud and food grow out of the earth'" (223). This God

represents a God before whom Grant can kneel because he is allowed to stand as a man. Additionally, the novel's ending implies a renewed spirituality for Grant: "I turned from him and went into the church. . . . I went to the desk and turned to face them. I was crying" (256). Though it was common practice during the 1940s, the period in which the novel is set, to use the church as a school, Gaines always refers to the classroom as "the church." The reference strengthens the focus on Christianity in the novel and especially in the novel's concluding lines. Grant's tears are further evidence of his religious awakening.

The events surrounding Jefferson's death indicate that Gaines does not establish the preacher as ineffective and defeated or assert the scholar as the victor in the debate. Both Ambrose and Grant are equally effective in their roles and together instill both of the goals Emma desires for Jefferson: "Walk like a man. Meet her up there" (222). Ultimate proof of the impact of Ambrose's shared role is Jefferson's acceptance of Christianity. Though critics discuss Jefferson as a Christ figure, most fail to address his religious conversion. Jefferson's spiritual act of "laying aside worldliness" occurs first: "Reverend Ambrose say I don't need nothing down here no more" (223). Jefferson's diary with its correlation to Grant's interpretation of God is further evidence of conversion. Grant explains that God makes people care for people. Correspondingly, Jefferson writes, ". . . an i tol her i love her an i tol her i was strong an she jus look ole and tried an pull me to her an kiss me an it was the firs time she never done that an it felt good . . ." (231). Grant states that it is God who brings people together. Jefferson's entry concerning the visit of community members begins, ". . . lord have merce sweet jesus

where all them people come from . . .” (230). Finally, Grant gives God credit for natural creations. On his last day, Jefferson makes four single-spaced entries, each related to nature: daybreak, the sun, a bird in the tree, and a blue sky (234).²³ Thus, Jefferson’s conversion is the definitive result of Gaines’s initiative to support Christianity through a meeting of minds between his scholar and preacher. The goal that Jefferson acquires manhood takes no precedence over the goal that he accepts Christianity. Instead, Gaines asserts that religion is an aspect of the complete man.

I agree with Philip Auger that Jefferson’s diary is a biblical text, but not with the notion that it is a “new testament” in the sense of relaying new ideals (*Native Sons* 66). The most specific evidence of Jefferson’s conversion lies in Gaines’s incorporation of the Christian Bible, so Jefferson is not the originator of the principles. Each of Jefferson’s entries has several scriptural parallels. Gaines’s reworking of scripture entails transforming it into the rhetoric of a barely literate, uneducated black male; however, nothing is lost in the transformation as illustrated by juxtaposition with biblical text. Jefferson’s new outlook on love references the New Testament: “And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men” (I Thes 3:12). Jefferson’s appreciation of communal fellowship recalls, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayer” (Rom 1:12). Finally, the attention to the natural embodies “Solomon’s Song”: “The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is

²³ In *The Color Purple* (1982), Shug explains to Celie the process of finding her true God through nature: “My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. . . . Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock” (203-04).

heard in our land; the fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell” (2: 12-13). Manipulating the text creates an authoritative voice for Jefferson, one that Grant and Ambrose can both accept as contributors to the process. However, Jefferson is not the originator of the concept but Gaines’s modern translator.

The key to resolving the preacher-scholar conflict is recognition of a shared purpose. Cones best sums up the commonality: “It would seem that Black Power and Christianity have this in common: the liberation of man! If the work of Christ is that of liberating man from alien loyalties, and if racism is . . . an alien faith, then there must be some correlation between Black Power and Christianity” (*Black Theology and Black Power* 39-40). Recognition of and constructive effort toward overcoming the common enemy instead of highlighting shortcomings of those on each side of the debate is the solution. The enemy is a society in which being black is a psychological and physical handicap, in which maintenance of cultural values is grounds for ridicule, and in which self-promotion is measured by assimilation into the dominant culture. For Gaines’s preachers and scholars, implementing the means by which to facilitate change is a daunting task as is formulating a defensible definition of faith that serves the majority. Therefore, Gaines interweaves components of experiential knowledge, southern communal traditions, civil-rights protest, religious fortitude, human nature, and race relations as a recipe for a conciliatory resolution for his preachers and scholars. Though the narratives do not always conclude on conciliatory terms as in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines’s model for change, those on each side of the debate are enriched by the interaction.

CHAPTER IV
BIBLICAL PARALLELS

“Imitation is the sincerest of flattery.”

*C.C. Colton*²⁴

“Men almost always walk in the paths trodden by others proceeding in their actions by imitation.”

*Machiavelli*²⁵

The Christian principle of divine election refers to God’s selection of those upon whom He will endow blessings or special favor. Specific examples of God’s elect and non-elect are Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers, respectively. Theologian Bill Crouse notes that the principle generates controversy among Bible scholars, for election seems to challenge God’s justice and impartiality and man’s free will. Crouse concludes that most theologians, however, accept the principle of “conditional election”: God selects humans based on His foreknowledge of what they will do. Thus, divine election is neither random nor arbitrary. The process is also not exclusionary, for the non-elect are not necessarily damned, and salvation is available to all. Additionally, the non-elect can receive some form of blessing, which is usually dependent upon the non-elect’s relationship to the elect (5-6, 25).²⁶ Theologian Joel Kaminsky states that despite centuries of modernist critique, Jews

²⁴ *Lacon: or, Many Things in Few Words, Addressed to Those Who Think*, p. 101.

²⁵ *The Prince*, p. 20.

²⁶ Primary examples of the non-elect receiving blessings are Cain and Ishmael. God provides Cain with divine protection to protect him from his enemies when he is alienated from God (Gen 4:15). Also, Ishmael, son of Abraham and the maid Hagar, is greatly blessed by God: “I will make him a great nation”

and Christians are unwilling to part with the notion of election (9). Similarly, with regard to embracing Biblical content, theologian Cain Felder concludes:

The Black Church and others within Black religious traditions give allegiance to biblical faith and witness, primarily because their own experiences seem to be depicted in the Bible. Many of the biblical stories reflect the existential reality of the Black story for the last few centuries in an environment typically hostile to the interests of blacks attaining their dull sense of human potential. Blacks have become all too familiar with being oppressed by socioeconomic forces or political powers, foreign and domestic, arrayed against them. . . . Blacks have consequently developed an experiential sympathy with much of the biblical witness to which they in turn give reverent attention as quite literally the revealed word of God. (156-57)

A prime example of allegiance to the principle of divine election occurs in Gaines's novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman*. Jane and other members of the community proclaim Jimmy Aaron "the One." He represents God's endowment of a leader for oppressed blacks. They all participate in raising him, watch him mature, and await the moment he will lead them, which he eventually does.

Without addressing African American's penchant to locate themselves and their circumstance within scriptural text, several critics have addressed biblical parallels in Gaines's fiction. For instance, Griffin draws parallels between Marcus of *Of Love and Dust* and Christ ("Ernest Gaines's Good News"). Auger establishes Jefferson as a Christ figure in the novel *A Lesson Before Dying* ("Lesson About Manhood"), and Valkeakari discusses the Christological characterization of Robert X of *In My Father's House*. Also,

(Gen 17:20). Kaminsky suggests that the point of the stories is not to critique God for elevating one person above another, but to critique the human propensity to become hateful toward those whom God favors (25).

Aubert depicts Raoul of *Catherine Carmier* as a Satanic figure, and Beavers discusses Jackson's "Christocentric" nature in the same novel.

In biblical parallels overlooked by his critics, Gaines incorporates the tenets of divine election as motif. Kaminsky outlines the basic features of divine-election stories in the Bible: God's promise of progeny, blessing and land, hardships endured by the elect, consequences of misusing elect status, and actions of the anti-elect (24-81), all of which Gaines utilizes in his fiction. Gaines's adherence to the principle despite theologian's arguments regarding its shortcomings counters critics' arguments that Gaines rejects Christianity. The author thereby recognizes African American's reverence of the Bible as a testament of their ancestors' plight and a guide for day-to-day existence.

The vivid characterization of Big Laura in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* immediately establishes her as a Moses parallel. Though Laura's presence is short-lived, Gaines inserts enough storyline to explore the Exodus motif, juxtaposing the plight of oppressed blacks with that of the enslaved Hebrews in the Bible.²⁷ Laura is a newly freed slave who is forced by circumstance into a Moses-like leadership position. To establish a connection to Christianity and the biblical story, Gaines engages the newly freed slaves in prayer before they begin their trek to the North. Then, Laura leads them into the wilderness just as Moses leads the freed children of Israel through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

²⁷ Other Exodus parallels appear in Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939); Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993); and Richard Wright's "Fire and Cloud" from the collection, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). Critic Cheryl Kirk-Duggan views Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) as an Exodus tale. She analyzes the Younger family's move from a Southside Chicago tenement to a suburban home as an allegorical transition from oppression to freedom (133-37).

With Laura, Gaines pays homage to Harriet Tubman, also referred to as “Black Moses.” With his fictional Moses, Gaines circumvents the issue of gender assignment by granting Laura male attributes: “She was big just like her name say, and she was tough as any man I ever seen. She could plow, chop wood, cut and load much cane as any man on the place” (17). When the other former slaves show their hesitance to lead the group, Laura assumes a leadership role along with the language of masculine authority: ““You free, then you go’n act like free men. If you want act like you did on that plantation, turn around now and go on back to that plantation”” (20). Gaines adds the inference of divine intervention with the depiction of Laura’s leadership style. Though the slaves have never ventured far from the plantation, Laura proceeds “like she knowed exactly where she was going” (20). Like an inspired Moses, Laura never looks behind to see who is following, knowing they will catch up. Laura appears driven by a guiding force, just as Tubman attributed her visions to lead to divine premonition (Larson 41-43, 102).²⁸

Gaines incorporates additional comparative circumstance to link Big Laura to Moses. When Moses suggests to God the Israelites will not follow him, God grants him supernatural power. He instructs him to cast his rod upon the ground, and the rod turns into a snake. In like manner, the former slaves of Gaines’s novel voice pre-sojourn concerns: “Somebody said we ought to get sticks just in case of snakes, so we all hunted for a good green stick” (17). When Moses again turns his rod into a serpent before Pharaoh, Pharaoh’s magicians perform the same wonder. However, Moses and Aaron’s

²⁸ In *Bound for the Promised Land* (2004), historian Kate Clifford Larson discusses the injury that caused Tubman to lapse into unconsciousness. When Tubman was an adolescent, a slaveholder struck her in the head with an iron weight as he was attempting to fell a runaway slave. During the bouts of unconsciousness that plagued Tubman for the remainder of her life, she claimed to receive divinely inspired visions of the future. Larson suggests that Tubman was a victim of temporal lobe epilepsy (41-43).

serpent consumes the others. Similarly, Big Laura wields her rod in like fashion. She first uses it to stop the “slow wit” who attempts to rape Jane. Kaminsky notes that the actions of the anti-elect (those who challenge God’s chosen) are so evil or dangerous that often they must be annihilated (111). Accordingly, Laura wields her rod against the patrollers who attack the group and fatally wounds two of their attackers: ““Goddam, she was mean. Did you see her? Did you see her? Goddam, she could fight”” (23). Kaminsky adds that the Hebrew Bible does not give the elect immunity from hardship, suffering, or grave danger resulting in death. The patrollers kill Big Laura, but to fully complement the parallel, Jane assumes the role of Aaron, Moses’s assistant, after her death. Jane also serves as a foster mother for Laura’s orphaned son, Ned. Gaines continues the parallel renderings, using the dynamics of Moses’ biblical tale of bondage, exodus, and triumph as allegorical outline for Jane’s life. She begins her life as a slave, faces numerous hardships as a result of race relations in the United States, and finds fulfillment in the novel’s close as a civil rights activist.

Another parallel which also incorporates the notion of divine favoritism involves Copper, protagonist of the short story “Bloodline,” and Samson, another of God’s chosen, of the biblical Book of Judges. Following Big Laura’s example, Copper represents the next generation of leaders. Though slavery and Reconstruction have ended, remnants of their existence remain. Dwellers on the Laurent plantation endure a discriminatory climate that binds them in a form of modern-day bondage. The men on the plantation are subservient and display many of the mannerisms of their ancestors: refusing to respond to condescending remarks, displaying fear and discomfort in the presence of the owner

Frank Laurent, and obeying without challenge. Copper is the illegitimate offspring of Walter Laureant, the deceased plantation owner, and a black woman who previously resided there. The narrator's statement, "A black woman, not matter who she was, didn't have a chance it he wanted her" (162) implies that Copper is the product of rape or some other form of coercion. The revelation heightens the demand for retribution for the plantation dwellers. The primary conflict in the story emerges when Copper refuses to enter the Laurent mansion through the back door as all blacks are required to do, the continuation of an antiquated tenet of whites' claims of superiority. Copper's refusal to conform, specifically in light of his claim as the legitimate heir of the plantation, prompts his Uncle Frank to action. Feeble and dying, Frank's final act of power is to attempt to break Copper's resolve and maintain the racial status quo of the plantation: "I didn't write the rules. I came and found them, and I shall die and leave them" (199). Rebellious against plantation politics, Copper proclaims himself a general and a champion, specifically the champion of all progeny of miscegenation. His conceived destiny is to raise an army and reclaim all stolen inheritances.

With the Copper-Samson parallel, Gaines employs rhetorical manipulation. Samson accepts God as the source of his strength: "I have been a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb" (Jud 16:17). Paradoxically, Gaines establishes Copper as one of God's chosen even though Copper has terminated his worship of God:

"I used to pray once," he said. He was calm again—too calm. "I used to pray and pray and pray. But the same God I was praying to was created by the same ones I was praying against. And Gods only listen to the people who create them. So I quit praying—there would have to be another way." (214)

Gaines incorporates the tenets of election to undermine Copper's claim of lost faith. With Copper's assertion of himself as the chosen, Gaines critiques period whites, who presuming themselves to be God's chosen, used the concept to justify slavery and their brutal treatment of slaves by assuming a god-like superiority over them.²⁹ Copper's destiny is to reclaim all that is stolen and restore justice. Even Copper's speech imitates biblical rhetoric: "The earth for everybody. Just like the sun for everybody. Just like the stars for everybody" (161).³⁰ Gaines's purpose is twofold. As he addresses salient features of African American history regarding black manhood, he incorporates Christian concepts to illustrate the impact of religion as a guiding principle in that same history. Copper clearly possesses characteristics that would distinguish him as a man according to white America's definition, for several characters note his similarities to his white uncles. Sociologists Richard Majors and Janet Billson argue that African American men define manhood in terms similar to whites: "breadwinner, provider, procreator, protector" (1). Because racism denies Copper the means to fulfill each requirement, he expresses the frustration, anger, and impatience of many black men in society. Majors and Billson suggest that men in this situation mistrust the words and actions of dominant culture (1). Since Copper views Christianity as a white creation, he concludes that it stands in opposition to his goals. By granting Copper elect status, however, Gaines contradicts the notion of a discriminatory religion which upholds an interpretation of Christianity as a moral code despite racist whites misuse of its tenets to promote self gain.

²⁹ See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845); Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do With It? Black Bodies/ Christian Souls* (2005); and Vincent Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History* (2003).

³⁰ See Ecclesiastes 5:9 and I Colossians 1:12.

Despite Copper's claim of lost faith, the remainder of his tale so closely resembles that of Samson's that it is difficult to concede that Copper is as removed from Christianity as he claims. Again, Gaines' choice of names is relevant. As if to ensure recognition of the parallel, he even names one of the minor characters Samson. Most significantly, Gaines assigns his protagonist the surname Christian, which means "follower of Christ" (Stafford 127). Naming is quite significant in both African and biblical tradition. The implication is that Copper's strength and mission are divinely inspired, and Copper has not relinquished his faith. Gaines's incorporation of the fact that Copper used to pray establishes him as a believer. However, Copper's decision to discontinue the practice does not remove him from some form of spiritual protection and guidance. Copper's repeated reinforcement of his name is an indicator: "The name is Christian, Uncle" (207). Former slaveholders and their warped biblical interpretation are responsible for Copper's attitude concerning God. Copper is a precursor to Gaines's modern scholars who still wrestle with the notion of Christianity proper. Copper's frustration with religion is compounded by association with whites who used Christianity to justify negative behavior. Since Copper has not yet delineated true Christianity from the religion of white oppressors, he claims loss of faith.

Continuing the parallel, Gaines endows Copper with a physical strength analogous to Samson's extraordinary strength. Samson's displays of strength occur when he feels he has been wronged. For example, Samson kills thirty men and takes their robes as retaliation for being duped. After Philistines burn Samson's wife and father alive, Samson "smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter" (Jud 15:8). Later, Samson

slays one thousand Philistines using only the jawbone of an ass as a weapon when the men attempt to bind Samson and present him to Philistine rulers. Noticeably, Gaines casts Copper in similar circumstances as evidence of divine election, illustrating, as in the Samson tale, the consequences of attempts to malign the elect. Copper requires unmanly strength to prevent Laurent from perpetrating additional wrongs upon him. When Copper refuses a summons to come to his uncle's house, Frank sends two plantation hands to subdue Copper and present him bound. Copper does not kill the men, but their bloodied bodies and torn clothing are evidence of his strength. After beating the men, Copper chains them together and pays Samson to carry them back to Frank. Unmoved by the first defeat, Frank rallies a larger force and sends six more men to subdue Copper. J.W., the leader, returns badly beaten to report that Copper has "'Nearly 'bout killed half of them boys'" (195). Though Laurent is the last remnant of a dying system of injustice, he persists in efforts to uphold it. In order to do so, Laurent must break Copper's resolve. Copper is not the only heir to the Laurent estate: "'Look like Mr. Walter got plenty more round here nobody ain't been sending for'" (175). However, Copper is the only one who has not been subdued, not because of his Laurent blood, for others possess it, but because of his status as "chosen."

Copper displays the characteristics of biblical leaders chosen as God's elect such as David and Joshua. Critic Keith Byerman, though, interprets Copper's actions as the "negative personality qualities" acquired from his father (197). Byerman overlooks Copper's motivation and bases this conclusion on Copper's defeat and humiliation of the men sent to subdue him. However, the men are Laurent's agents dispatched to serve as

the muscle in upholding the unjust Laurent code that denies retribution to black heirs. Even if Copper was not a descendent of Walter Laurent, his treatment of the men falls under the legal guidelines of self defense, for J.W. departs on the mission with “blood in his eyes” (194). Also, as Copper points out, whites are the creators of chains, sticks, ropes, knives, and significantly, the law used to oppress blacks (209). Additionally, Byerman states that since Copper is “simply a black man,” his claims to property raise questions about his mental stability (197). The critic’s comment is an oversimplification of the circumstance. Though Copper’s demands run counter to established race relations on the plantation, they are indeed founded on moral terms. Copper’s insistence on retrieving his rightful inheritance does not necessarily attest to insanity, but to an awareness of justice. Once Laurent’s brand of race-driven discrimination diminishes, Copper’s demands attain legal footing, for he is a true heir to the estate.

Adhering to the basic principles of divine election, Gaines incorporates the basic promises rendered unto the elect: land and blessing. In the biblical tale, Samson, furious that his father-in-law has given his wife to another man, binds three hundred foxes, attaches firebrands to the animals’ tails, and lets them run through the Philistines’ crops during harvest time. The fire burns the corn and the olive trees. Like Samson, Copper focuses on agriculture as a means to achieve justice. Each time Frank sends a messenger to request Copper’s presence at the mansion, Copper is engaged in the same activity, surveying the land and taking notes. He assesses the corn, cotton, cane, hay, the trees, and the fruit. Copper does not intend to destroy the agricultural assets, but to claim them as his own. It is his reward for wrongs committed against him and his mother.

Implementation of his plan is as significant a blow as destruction of the property. Frank explains the historical nature of birthright that he and others uphold: ““Then you know because your mon was black you can’t claim a damn thing. Not only birthright, you can’t even claim a cat”” (206). Frank’s intent is to leave such racially distinguished laws intact, for their reversal would shatter the fragile existence to which he so desperately clings. It is implicit that Frank knows Copper and his “army,” symbolic of a changing social dynamic, will forcefully overturn the current laws, and with them will go Frank’s already diminishing command of power.

Gaines ends Copper’s tale in the same graphic manner that Samson’s ends. Samson, betrayed by his wife Delilah, loses his strength. The Philistines capture him and bring him to a festival to make sport of him. Samson cries out to God to restore his strength in order to take vengeance. His request acknowledged, Samson exerts force against the two pillars that support the temple and manages to topple it, killing more people in this act than he has killed in his entire life. Similarly, Copper’s final victory will occur in his promised return: ““We’ll be back, Uncle. And I’ll take my share. I won’t beg for it, I won’t ask for it; I’ll take it. I’ll take it or I’ll bathe this whole plantation in blood”” (217). Copper’s vision of war prophetically foreshadows pending race riots and equal-rights demonstrations. From the mid 1960s until early 1970s, over seven hundred fifty race riots erupted in major cities across the country, resulting in numerous casualties, injuries, and extensive property damage.³¹ As with Samson, Copper’s revenge will come with a significant death toll. However, Copper will herald in the death of

³¹ See *Encyclopedia of American Race Riots* (2006) by Walter Rucker and James Upton..

tradition, an end to the tyranny of rapists, murderers, and plunderers who hide behind the laws they created to protect themselves from punishment for racial atrocities. Copper's metaphorical army represents the product of coerced miscegenation and other wrongs committed by men like Walter Laurent all across the country: "'There're millions just like me. Maybe not my color, but without homes, without birthrights, just like me'" (213).³² Copper notes that he can he can smell future events in the air. The troubled air serves as a typological indicator of Christian warfare or renewal,³³ another allusion to the concept of divine intervention.

Like Copper, Jackson Bradley of *Catherine Carmier* inherits a messiah-like mission. As previously discussed, the local minister Reverend Armstrong likens Jackson to a man on such a quest. Also similar to Copper, Jackson's mission is to promote the cause of racial equality. The difference between the two men is action. Jackson struggles with defining his calling, so he refers to the force that weighs upon him as "a search for dignity and truth" (81). His ambiguity is evidence of his struggle to resist what he knows is his destiny. Because Jackson is yet to acknowledge his mission, his focus in the novel is, like his biblical counterpart Jacob, establishment of a future with a family.

Jackson leads a quest to rescue his beloved Catherine from the clutches of Raoul Carmier, her domineering and borderline incestuous father, which mirrors Jacob and his

³² In a 1996 interview in Germany, Wolfgang Lepschy suggests to Gaines that it was dangerous to conclude "Bloodline" with Copper's promise of violent retaliation. Laughing, Gaines responds, "How was that, why dangerous? . . . Well, as I said, Copper is mad. Copper has no army to come back. He has nothing; he is mad" (200). I think Gaines is signifying on historical Anglo-Saxon aggression as an attribute of masculinity. Tongue in cheek, he plays on dual meanings of the term "mad." "Angry" sums up Copper's emotions regarding racism while "insane" appeases a dominant culture fearful of black uprising.

³³ In Ephesians 2: 2, Satan is referenced as the "prince of the power of the air." Also, Paul exhorts sinners to recall the grace of God and rebel against evil. This epistle to the Thessalonians promotes a shift in power: "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air" (Thessalonians 4: 17).

efforts to win his wives from their deceptive and domineering father, Laban. Kaminsky states that the concept of election is not only for the benefit of the elect, but about God's plan for the world (24). Adhering to the principle of election that God elects based on foreknowledge of future actions, Gaines promotes divine inspiration for his protagonist. Jackson's election serves three purposes. It releases Catherine from Raoul's domination, reinforces Catherine's faith, and forces Jackson to acknowledge that he will never sense completeness in his life without a religious component. Though Jackson has undergone the rite of baptism and was once deemed a "great little Christian" (65), his academic studies have disillusioned him, rendering him cynical in regard to Christianity: "I haven't forgotten God. But Christ, the church, I don't believe in that bourgeois farce—" (100). Though Jackson is exposed daily to religious discourse, his rejection of Christianity precipitates his fall at the novel's close.

The biblical book of Genesis details Jacob's trials with his father-in-law. Jacob agrees to serve Laban for seven years in exchange for marriage to Rachel. However, Laban deceives Jacob on the night of the nuptials and brings Leah, the eldest daughter, to Jacob's bed. Thus, Jacob serves another seven years, at the end of which he can leave with both women as his wives. During the seven years, God blesses Jacob with progeny. Jacob's second request to leave is countered by another deal from Laban. Jacob agrees to breed the flocks, taking the speckled and spotted cattle and goats and the brown sheep for himself. Jacob ensures that he breeds the healthiest animals for himself, and soon his flock outnumbers Laban's. Fearful of Laban's brewing rage, Jacob secretly flees with his wives, children, and animals. Laban pursues Jacob, but does not engage in a fight because

of divine intervention: ““It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt: but the God of your father spake unto me yesternight, saying, Take thou heed that thou speak not to Jacob either good or bad””(Gen 31: 29). The controversy ends with a peace covenant, and Jacob departs for home.

Similar to Jacob, Jackson’s primary rival for a future with Catherine is her father, who faces vexing external and self-generated obstacles. Raoul has situated Catherine as a surrogate wife, despite the presence of his wife Della after Della conceives a child in an extramarital affair with another man. Furthermore, Raoul, a Creole, is the only nonwhite sharecropper remaining in the area. White landowners have leased all the prime land to the Cajuns, who have, in turn, driven off their competition. Despite a laudable attempt to accomplish through physical labor what the Cajuns do with tractors, Raoul faces imminent defeat. Thus, Catherine is his only “property,” a property he has no intention of relinquishing. When Catherine states that she is not married to Raoul, Della responds matter-of-factly, ““You not?”” (131). Neighbors are also aware of Raoul’s desperate control over Catherine: ““He feels that the boy might get her to leave, and when and if this happens, that will be the end of him”” (118). The controlling Raoul is, undoubtedly, the modern embodiment of Laban.

With Raoul cast as Laban, Jackson must fulfill parallel duties of Jacob as rescuer. Despite Jackson’s anti-Christian sentiment, Gaines maintains a focus on religion by incorporating the church as a key setting for the couple’s encounters. Jackson divulges his plan to flee the parish while he and Catherine stand behind a church building. Here, Gaines inserts significant, dual-messaged dialogue:

“Come,” he said. He had grasped her arm now, and he was pulling her away from the church. “Come.”
“No,” she said desperately. She was trying to hold onto the church now. “No.”
(223)

In an earlier conversation, Catherine and Jackson discuss church involvement. Catherine frequently attends; Jackson never does. Catherine is silent and uncomfortable after Jackson’s admission: “[S]he did not like the way she was feeling about him” (141). Jackson’s wavering belief system evokes this feeling of discomfort, not the taboo nature of their relationship. Following syllogistic reasoning, Catherine cannot leave with Jackson because of her faith. Catherine’s adherence to faith hinders her decision to marry a man who rejects the tenets of Christianity. Catherine’s “grip” on the church is literal, but it is also distinctively figurative. Jackson will take her away from church, a separation that she fears as much as separation from her family. Thus, she clings to an established bastion of safety. Even when Catherine reluctantly agrees to leave with Jackson, she considers leaving the church tantamount to leaving her family: “I will not see him, my father, again, I will not see Lillian again, I will not see Jeanette again, I will not see the church again” (231). It is not relevant that Catherine and Jackson’s family are of different denominations; the significance is religion in and of itself and the difficulty of severing ties to it.

Again, the tales of Jacob and Jackson converge as both men engage in escape attempts and confrontation with the fathers. Jackson convinces Catherine to take her son Nelson and flee the parish with him just as Jacob flees with his wives and sons. However, a consequential difference is that Jacob’s escape is blessed by God. On the

other hand, Raoul assaults Jackson in a bloody brawl. Jackson is not granted the full privileges of the elect because of his rejection of Christianity. Catherine tells Raoul that she will not leave him, promising Jackson a later reunion. The reader is left to speculate about the couple's future, but Gaines has already inserted an enigmatic clue. Earlier, Catherine makes a foreshadowing observation that resolves the question of whether or not she will join Jackson. Pondering her new life with Jackson, she concludes, "No, I will not be happy. To be happy, one must work and believe. He does not believe" (231). Noticeably, faith is the qualifier for the union, not merely love.

Gaines injects more dialogic subtext. Though Catherine promises Jackson that she will join him, her actions and word choice suggest otherwise: "'Have faith in me,' she cried. 'Have faith in me.' She drew herself away and looked at him. 'I will come. . . Not now. But I will come. I swear. I swear. . . Just have faith in me'" (245). Catherine's plea to Jackson is rich in nonsecular rhetoric, but she supplants "God" with "me" as the recipient of faith. She emphasizes the point by adding the qualifier "just" to the entreaty (245). The "just" equates to "only," a limiting option that conflicts with the religious tenets Catherine upholds, further indication that she cannot reunite with Jackson despite what she promises him will transpire. Gaines has promoted Christianity as a basic requirement for happiness, perhaps even for the very dignity and truth that have eluded Jackson.

Jackson Bradley's ordeal finds focus at this moment. Jackson's role as elect serves the purpose of rendering insight. First, Catherine accepts the outcome of a life as a believer with Jackson as a nonbeliever: "'[H]e won't be happy, and I won't be happy

either” (231-32). Next, Raoul experiences a physical and emotional fall at this moment designed to force assessment of his lifestyle: “He would not believe that he was beaten . . . There was too much left for him to do. There was the crop to get in; there was Catherine. How could he possibly fall?” (241). Raoul sums up all the salient features of his very being in just a few lines. As a result of his physical and psychological falls, Raoul acknowledges the devastating effects his lifestyle has imposed upon his family. In his sole effort to keep pace with the Cajun farmers, Raoul has alienated everyone around him, black, white, and Cajun. His self-centeredness has rendered him a solitary man, and now one who is defeated because of it. Finally, and most significantly, Jackson is left to reconsider his religious plight. Gaines never fully establishes Jackson as a nonbeliever even though Jackson makes the claim. His position is similar to Grant Wiggins’s; he wants to believe but cannot accept certain aspects of Christianity. Until he arrives at a definition of Christianity which he can embrace, he is destined to remain conflicted.

Gaines’s synthesis of established biblical tales with his modern-day storylines allows him to retain and promote religious and cultural conventions. Depicting various characters as Christ figures, Laura as Moses, Copper as Samson, and Jackson as Jacob positions them as the epitome of strength, compassion, and leadership. The well-established parallels link Gaines’s characters to strong biblical counterparts who strive to overcome adversity and uphold the principles in which they believe, even to death. Though the patrollers murder Big Laura, her example signifies inner strength, survival instinct, and maternal trappings. Copper’s designation as soldier and his connection to the earth likens him to biblical combatants with God’s favor. Finally, the basis for Jackson’s

downfall is his refusal to acknowledge the requisite Christian element in his designation as rescuer. Thus Jackson's mission fails, prompted by his denial of faith. Despite Gaines's characters' appreciation of or rejection of Christianity, his copious attention to parallel rendering of biblical and secular circumstance suggests intentionality in maintaining a religion-based standard in his fiction.

CHAPTER V

HOMAGE TO FOLK TRADITION

“No one becomes a laughing-stock who laughs at himself.”

*Seneca*³⁴

“What could be more mediaeval, for instance, than molding a waxen heart, and sticking pins in it, or melting it slowly before a fire, while charms are being repeated with the hope that as the waxen heart melts or breaks, the life of some enemy will depart?”

*Lafcadio Hearn*³⁵

Generally speaking, folklore refers to the beliefs, customs, and traditions of a people passed from generation to generation. It is a broad category that includes superstitions, music, and dance. Much oral folklore involves storytelling such as myths, folktales, legends, riddles, and ballads (Green 830). Gaines’s fiction provides opportunity to showcase his mastery of folk tradition.³⁶ Dialect is a primary area, and Gaines captures the rhythm of the dialect of the area to establish verisimilitude regarding Louisianan life. Also, Gaines ventures into the storytelling realm with his examination of two folktale concepts: the preacher tale and the conjure woman. Folklorist Hilary Austin states that preacher tales existed prior to 1865, but grew in popularity after Emancipation because of the growth of separate black churches and the black preacher’s rise as a powerful community leader (649). Like the preacher tales, conjuration stories originated during

³⁴ *De Constantia*, Chapter 17, Section 3. Quoted in *The Macmillan Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases*, p. 1355.

³⁵ “New Orleans Superstition” p. 560.

³⁶ In “Folklore in the Writing of Ernest J. Gaines,” Gaudet details Gaines’s integration of folk customs, beliefs, superstition, and speech into his writing. She attributes Gaines’s knowledge of the folk tradition to his experience of growing up in a parish in Louisiana.

slavery and continued in the decades after the Civil War. The tales were an attempt to “equalize the imbalance of power” between slave masters and slaves because conjurers’ powers evoked fear in all (Hill 59).³⁷ Folklorist John Roberts adds that many Christian slaves believed God empowered individuals with the power to conjure, and the conjurers’ behavior, power, and knowledge revealed the superiority of spiritual powers over slave masters’ physical powers (*From Trickster to Badman* 94). In essence, Gaines’s rendering of the two forms of folklore allows him to pay homage to African American folk tradition while simultaneously incorporating positive Christian concepts into his fiction.

Like his literary predecessors, Gaines relies upon exaggerated stereotypes regarding black preachers to create his version of the preacher tale. Folklorist James Rucker contends that the black folk preacher, by virtue of his role as congregational and community leader, is often the object of satire and comedy. He adds that the preachers’ “ability to laugh at themselves has helped the community to survive and has produced a great body of stories and anecdotes” (93). Completely ignored by critics, another role for Gaines’s preacher characters Reverends Johnson and Simmons is to provide the comic relief generated by their counterparts in African American folktales. Gaines’s treatment does not demean black preachers; instead, it showcases African Americans’ ability to find humor and uplift in religion. Gaines’s humor illustrates that Christianity is not all ceremony and seriousness, so his rendering of the preacher tale showcases the fun-spirited aspect of Christian fellowship.

³⁷ The conjure theme appears in the work of several prominent African Americans: Charles Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman* (1899); Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1994); Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (1988); Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973); and Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935), *Tell My Horse* (1937), and *The Sanctified Church: The Folklore Writings of Zora Neale Hurston* (1981).

The preacher is a commonly-used stock character in folktales. Folklorist J. Mason Brewer's *The Word on the Brazos* is an extensive collection of preacher tales. Brewer notes that the tales have one common characteristic, entertainment. The stories, though humorous, do not suggest that preachers did not take religion seriously. Instead, the preacher tales follow patterns found in the oral literature, specifically the comic anecdote. Despite the lampoon of their actions and mannerisms, preachers remained the acknowledged leaders of the black community (2-3). In an interview with critics Gaudet and Wooten, Gaines acknowledges the use of humor in his literature: "I see lots of things as being humorous, even if it's in a ridiculous way. When people take advantage of people, or when people hurt other people, it's often just ridiculous and the humor comes through" (212). Gaines adds that he considers humor a component of change (Gaudet and Wooten 213). In linking humor and religion, he addresses two prominent sources of strength for African Americans during times of trial. Folklorist Dolan Hubbard notes that the "robust humor" which pervades preacher tales obstructs "grimness and despair" and attests to African Americans' resilience and determination (329). As the embodiment of folklore preachers, Reverend Johnson of "Boy in the Double-Breasted Suit" and Reverend Simmons of "A Long Day in November" are not perfunctory, for their role is to drive the plot, which they do remarkably well. Gaines exaggerates his characters' mannerisms; they frequently come to dinner and devour a majority of the food (usually chicken), and they agree with their staunchest supporters regardless of the circumstances. Comparison of Gaines's comedic preachers to those of popular preacher tales reveals his mastery of the folkloric storytelling tradition. A focus based solely on Simmons and

Johnson's shortcomings as ideal or realistic preachers or on their inability to present Christianity as a means to resolve conflict or ease suffering overlooks the men's designation as components of Christian-based humor.

Gaines illustrates an acute awareness of the elements of the preacher tale. Austin notes that "as a result of the community dictum to feed the preacher after church, a great many tales revolve around the preacher's enormous appetite" (650). Adhering to the formula, Gaines introduces Reverend Johnson as the preacher is saying grace over a Sunday meal while simultaneously slapping the hand of Oscar Wheeler, another dinner guest. With Johnson and Oscar's antics, Gaines sets up the "play frame" of the preacher tale, a marked departure from the rules of ordinary behavior during which all acts are considered nonserious (Green 833). Oscar is attempting to secure a piece of chicken before the conclusion of the prayer. The parental action rendered unto an adult, linked with Johnson's humorous prayer, sets the stage for the comedic element of the tale: "Gracious Master we thank thee for this food which is prepared for us, the *nurses* [italics mine] of our bodies" (87). At the conclusion of grace, Johnson takes a piece of chicken first, suggestive that the punishment he administered was more so to ensure that he received the choicest piece of chicken than to preserve the sanctity of the prayer. Though acknowledging Gaines's use of stereotype in her discussion of theme and technique in the short story, Doyle takes the preacher too seriously and completely disregards the folkloric comedy elements at work. Therefore, she refers to Johnson as "the first of Gaines' rather numerous preachers who are either fools or abusers of power—or both" (31). Johnson indeed acts foolishly; however, it is the foolish behavior that generates the laughter.

Additionally, Johnson is not a fool, but shrewd like the trickster character, another quality exhibited by the folktale preacher. Common characteristics are a strong appetite and greed. To satiate these desires, the trickster relies upon cleverness, hence Johnson's prayer-time antics. Furthermore, the preacher demonstrates that he has no real power as the tale unfolds.

To further equate Johnson with his counterpart in the preacher tale, Gaines continues to juxtapose dialogue and action:

But the preacher kept on talking, and putting chicken in his mouth, and tearing it away from the bone, and chewing; then putting the bone half covered with chicken back in his mouth, and pulling the bone out of his mouth, very clean and white like it had been washed in a stream, clean of everything. . . . The preacher stuck his tongue down in the corner of his mouth, between his back teeth and jaw, and dugged out a piece of chicken that hadn't been swallowed, and chewed on it all the time looking straight at my old man. (88-91)

Oster notes that gluttony displayed by a preacher in the folk environment is a standard comic theme of the preacher tale (83). Gaines adds additional lampoon by linking Johnson's clean, white chicken bone that looks as if it has been washed in a stream to Christian baptism. The religious rite is often performed in a body of water, and its purpose is to wash away sin and render the sinner pure and white as snow.

Gaines's portrayal of Johnson's eating style is comparable to Elder Morrow's in "The Preacher Who Asked too Many Questions":

Brothuh Robinson turnt to Elduh Morrow an' say, "Elduh, what paa't of de chicken does you lack bes'?"

"Ah lacks de breas' an' all de res'," say Elduh Morrow, jes' a gigglin' an' actin' silly; so Brothuh Morrow serves 'im a big piece of breas' an' a good ole juicy drumstick. De Elguh et dis an' 'tain't long 'fo' he pass his plate again for

some mo' dat good ole chicken. He et dis, an' 'fo' you kin turn aroun', he done pass his plate de third time for some mo chicken. . . . Putty soon, he pass his plate do fo'th time for some mo' chicken. He clear his th'oat a little an' rare way back in his chair, an' say, "Humph, dis sho' am good chicken. . . ." (64)

Both preachers' actions are comically crude. Similarly, Gaines incorporates idiomatic language, "dugged out a piece of chicken" (91), just as the author of the other preacher tale mimics the dialect of the Texas Brazos region. After devouring most of the meal, Morrow, ironically, prepares to chastise Brother Robinson for the means by which he acquired the chicken, just as Reverend Johnson chastises Oscar for sinful behavior. The precise detail of the narrated behavior draws attention to what Johnson is doing while downplaying the import of his words, a diatribe against sin. Gaines's incorporation of irony increases the hilarity. The preacher's gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins, is a tangible representation of the shameful type of sin of which he speaks. Johnson's lack of awareness of his own flaws is meant to render him a stereotype or archetype, not as the epitome of the black preacher. The principle role of the folklore preacher is to skirt the margins of social morality, finding justification for his flawed actions or failing to recognize their existence. His flagrant neglect of principles induces laughter, not a mean-spirited derision.

Adhering to the style of the traditional preacher tale, Gaines includes other comparable characteristics for his preacher. One such characteristic that he grants to Johnson is superhuman strength: "[I]t was said around Wakeville that he could pick up a fifty-pound sack of rice with his teeth and swing it like a pendulum for a minute, and go

to church on Sunday and preach two full hours without stopping” (88).³⁸ The claim is an obvious embellishment. The “it was said” lead-in is frequently used in folk tales to introduce overstatement and gossip. Another characteristic that Gaines inserts is the exaggerated sermon delivery. In the “Preacher Tales” chapter of her folklore collection *Every Tongue Got to Confess*, Zora Neale Hurston provides a paradigm of preacher mannerisms which Gaines accurately follows. In “Gabriel’s Trumpet,” the loud preacher “kept on preachin’ in uh strainin’ voice wid his eyes shet tight” (21).³⁹ Similarly, Gaines’s preacher bangs his fists on the Bible and the table to get attention and frequently shouts. Max, Oscar’s son, provides the extensive description of Reverend Johnson. The child cannot follow any of the sermons because Johnson is “making too much noise” (90), and the only effect of the fist banging is preventing sleep. The banging and “hollering” occur to maintain the parishioners’ attention and, at dinner, to force Oscar to respond to Johnson’s comments. Gaines’s use of a child narrator is a literary tactic. Usually, the child’s point of view represents an unadulterated version of events that readers can trust. Therefore, Johnson is rendered more stereotypical because of the author’s obvious embellishment. The child’s noticeably limited description of Adele, whom he greatly admires, further confirms the notion that Gaines intends to establish Johnson as the embodiment of the folklore preacher. The detailed rendering of Johnson’s

³⁸ In her collection *The Sanctified Church* (1938), folklorist Zora Neale Hurston includes several tales about the folk character Daddy Mention. Townspeople, without questioning the validity of the exaggerated exploits, continue to share the narratives. In one tale, Daddy Mention escapes a chain gang by walking away with a whole tree on his shoulder. According to lore, he walks across the entire county and sells the log to purchase a car to leave the state (41-48).

³⁹ In *Of Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston includes another tale with a similar storyline in which a preacher fervently delivers his message for two weeks: “He preached and he reared and pitched.” Angered because no one says “Amen” or bows down, the preacher takes out his .44 Special to frighten them into conformity. He shoots over the people’s heads and even makes the “peg-leg” sexton bow down (22-23).

characteristics keeps the focus on the character who guides the storyline of a preacher tale, the flawed cleric.

Another frequent occurrence in a preacher tale is the tendency for the preacher's audience to tire of his diatribes or antics. Gaines also establishes the dynamic in his story. Fed up with Johnson's tirade, Oscar decides that he must sever his relationship with Adele, the hostess. The assertion merely sets the stage for more of Johnson's humorous antics. Critic Mary Ellen Doyle views Johnson as a foil to Oscar in order for Oscar to realize a truth regarding attaining manhood through self control and independence (32). Actually, the roles can be transposed; Oscar serves as foil for Johnson's comically ironic banter and facetiousness, as illustrated in the rhetorical wordplay. Again, Gaines preserves the dialect and rhythm of the preacher tale. Johnson counters Oscar's "I won't be coming back" with "Run, sinner, run" (92). Johnson believes Oscar is running away from the discussion of sin. Oscar, of course, can no longer tolerate Johnson's presence. Puns and verbal misunderstandings are common sources of folktale humor (Green 359). The men continue to engage in a battle of words, using dialogue parallel in structure for effect:

"Can't the Good Lord find you no matter where you hide?"

"Can't you shut him up?"

"Sure," the preacher said. "Sure, shut up the word of the Lord." (92)

Johnson's depiction of himself as the voice of the Lord is a perfect segue for his next act, striking Oscar down. Gaines perhaps allows Johnson to assume the power associated with God to parody congregants' real-life elevation of the preacher as God's second in

command. The preacher's claim of divinely granted power mirrors yet another preacher tale. In "De Preacher An' De Sheep's Tails," another tale from Hurston's *Every Tongue Got to Confess* collection," a preacher claims the power to change a baby's skin color from black to white "cuz he wuz uh man uh God" (21). Adele's response to Oscar, "'Don't you hit a man of God'" (94), complements the humor that precedes it because of its ludicrous nature. Johnson's behavior has established him as anything but godly, further evidence that the preacher is not a characterization of real-life preachers.

Though established under similar circumstances, a general disagreement in terms, Johnson's assault of Oscar is not comparable to the preacher's assault of the student in "The Sky is Gray." The severity of the preacher's behavior in "The Sky is Gray" results from frustration regarding the generational gap and the fight against societal inequalities. In "Boy in the Double-Breasted Suit," the fight is a narrative tactic to continue the lampoon of the folktale preacher. Reverend Johnson looks upward, mumbles an inaudible prayer and declares, "'Sometimes you got to play by the other fellow's rules to get results'" (94). Again, similar circumstances are not meant to deliver a homologous message. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Billy defies the sheriff and declares that certain situations compel him to go against the Bible. However, Billy is defending the parish against racist offenders. On the other hand, Johnson is merely stammering out an excuse to pardon himself for yet another unnecessary attack on Oscar, who has demonstrated uncharacteristic restraint. The polar extremes of the folkloric preachers from other males in Gaines' fiction, especially the preachers, illustrate Gaines's sense of humor and his ability to incorporate folklore in his fiction.

Gaines concludes the parody by casting Adele in the role of straight (wo)man. She assumes the posture of the moral character: “‘No, Reverend Johnson,’ Mrs. Adele said Christian-like” (94). Having fulfilled his role of comedic element, Johnson recognizes his cue to leave and departs “very straight and tall and looking directly ahead” (95). His accentuated upright posture suggests he experiences neither shame nor remorse. Johnson is unchangeable, for that is the nature of the role. Reverend Johnson is the epitome of the flawed, self-centered, greedy, scripture-manipulating folktale preacher. Though Oscar is upset with Adele for allowing the preacher to berate him, Oscar will certainly reconsider his decision to terminate the relationship, symbolized by his decision to allow Max to retain the suit Adele has previously given him. Likewise, Johnson’s behavior has no effect on Adele’s Christian faith or her concern about her relationship with Oscar as illustrated by her humorous parting words to Max. Adele makes the boy promise to pray for everyone, “‘But your father more’” (96). Reverend Johnson does not hamper the circumstance of the new family unit; if anything, he makes the members appreciate each other more.

Similar to Reverend Johnson, the introduction of Reverend Simmons in “A Long Day in November” immediately casts the man in the comic vein of the preacher tale of folklore. Simmons also becomes involved in a family dynamic in which he adds more humor to the scene than solutions. With Simmons, Gaines again relies upon a child narrator to introduce the preacher, which allows the author to escape the charge of bias towards the preacher. Children tend to make and share observations which adults might

not, so the depictions of the preachers are detailed and vivid, exaggerating the features unique to the folk preacher.

The first jab involves Simmons's limited vision. Simmons sits at the fireplace reading his Bible when Sonny and his father, Eddie, enter. Sonny notes that Simmons "takes off his glasses like he can't see us too good with them on" (40). Babb interprets the gesture as "the preacher's inability to 'see' Eddie's problem clearly" (20). However, the act also supports the characterization of comic foil. Limited vision, absent-mindedness, awkward statures, and humorous dialogues are oft-depicted traits of such personas in preacher tales. As the three make the trek to see Amy, Eddie's estranged wife, Sonny continues the cartoonish description; Simmons wears a long black coat and a big cowboy hat. Humming to himself, the reverend walks so fast Eddie and Sonny can barely keep abreast of his long strides. Though Simmons holds a position that garners respect, his overall demeanor provides stark contrast and renders him a harmless buffoon, but an effective and necessary element of the folkloric plot.

Reverend Simmons cannot offer Eddie sound advice because logical, unbiased reasoning is uncharacteristic of the archetype. When Eddie informs Simmons that Rachel, Amy's mother, fired her shotgun at him earlier, Simmons is wont to accept such criticism of an avid parishioner: "That don't sound like Sister Rachel" (41). The humor lies in the dramatic irony. Rachel not only chases Eddie away at gunpoint but also is negotiating an adulterous union between her daughter and Freddie Jackson, a local suitor. Comically, she commits such acts and then erupts into spirituals about going to heaven. Gaines does not divulge the details of Simmons's conversation with Amy, but the outcome is that

Simmons advises Eddie to “straighten that out the best way you can” (43). Simmons has obviously decided in his own best interests that he does not want to risk the consequences of siding against a faithful churchgoer. The reverend does, however, pause to justify the actions of his devoted parishioner, an explanation that is not without moral flaws, but contributes to the humor: “She just shot to kind of scare you away”(43). Babbs, viewing Simmons as the epitome of the black preacher, refers to the reverend’s advice as “ineffectual placation and compliant resignation” (21). However, the farcical Simmons knows the explanation is faulty, so he changes the topic of discussion to fire and wood, a topic so remote that even the reader can participate in Eddie’s frustration. Simmons provides no assistance to Eddie because that is the nature of his character in the folktale. Instead of focusing on the supposed ineffectiveness of preacher’s advice, focus should be placed upon Gaines’s meticulous preservation of the folktale preacher vernacular and behavior in order to insert an element of African American folklore into his fiction.

Considered in context, Reverend Simmons’s reasoning technique parallels that of the other preachers in the folktale, “Sister Liza and the New Pastor.” The preachers overlook her husband’s misbehavior because Liza is a generous tither:

She [Liza] a good payin’ membuh, so de preachuhs don’ nevu ch’ch Ole Mose an’ teck his name offen de books, don’ give a nevu min’ how much he cuss an’ cavort an’ shoot craps up an’ down be Bottoms. De preachuhs pays heed to de money Sistuh Liza th’ows in de colleckshun plate evuh Sunday de Lord sen’, an’ dey lows Ole Mose to be sho’ ‘nuf gone to de Devul ez far ez dey is concerned.
(Brewer 28)

Mose's sin-ridden actions mirror those of Rachel; however, the humorous nature of their presentations, including the preachers' stance of non-involvement, allows for dismissal of their antics, even by the religious minded. Gaudet, instead, mistakenly refers to Rachel's acts as indicative of the "hypocrisy of Christians," an offensive generalization of actual Christians, and summarizes Simmons as "more concerned with worldly affairs than with Eddie's problems" (82). Babb also overlooks the skillful incorporation of the folkloric country preacher archetype because she focuses only on the fact that the conjure woman helps Eddie and not the preacher. In her discussion of the short story, Babb uses the scene as an example of what she deems a recurring theme in Gaines's fiction, "the impotency of orthodox religion" (*Ernest Gaines* 20). Again, such over-the-top behaviors are not meant to be analyzed as serious representations of black parishioners and preachers. Gaines is, instead, injecting his own brand of humor in creating a precise preacher tale.

Simmons has multiple roles within the tale, comic relief and narrative vehicle to advance Gaines's use of another folkloric element, the conjure woman. Eddie has chosen two possible sources of assistance for his dilemma, the preacher and the conjurer. Gaines's primary conjurers are Madame Gautier of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and Madame Toussaint of "A Long Day in November" and "My Grandpa and the Haint." Gaines again manipulates reader expectation with his portrayal of the conjure woman by dismantling stereotype. In her classic text *Narratology*,⁴⁰ cultural theorist and critic Mieke Bal explains that mention of certain professions, gender, external factors, and personality quirks generate reader expectation. The narrative may fulfill expectation

⁴⁰ Bal's text is a detailed introduction of the elements of a comprehensive theory of narrative: narration, sequential ordering, rhythm, characters, spatial aspects, visualization, and fabula components.

or just as easily frustrate it (124). With his conjure women Madames Toussaint and Gautier, Gaines chooses the latter and replaces stereotypical and media-driven expectations of evil and sorcery with Christian-based ethics and codes of behavior.

After removing the negativity associated with hoodoo, Gaines presents conjure women who engage in sound philosophical dialogues on the nature of men, marriage, and race. The women are more analogous to marriage counselors than sorcerers. More significantly, though the women claim professions associated with evil and, therefore, antithetical to Christianity, they espouse doctrine grounded in Christian principles such as love, the sacredness of marriage, and compassion in a moral, non-perverted manner. John Roberts explains that the perception of the conjurer as an individual who used power to induce fear was based on Western bias which linked the black-culture conjurer to the African witch doctor and witchcraft. Therefore, there is a scholarly tendency to ignore or misrepresent the religious foundations of conjure (*Trickster to Badman* 68). Readers expecting a tale of magic or psychic ability are caught off guard by Gaines' reversal. The author's unexpected treatment of the women is further evidence of his focus on religion as a positive source of uplift and guidance. His conjure women do not cause harm but use religion to repair broken marriages and familial bonds. Thus, the purpose of both of Gaines's folklore elements, his folk preachers and conjure women, is to promote, not denigrate religion.

With his conjure women, Gaines establishes a link to African and African-American religious traditions and cultural icons. Eighteenth-century documentation indicates that slaves entering Louisiana's colonies practiced Voodoo. However, key

elements of the religion were representations of an African god, feast days, and chapels containing images of Christian saints and African spirits. In his extensive study of folk beliefs, Newbill Puckett, sociologist and folklorist, notes that most of the conjure doctors with whom he interacted were “unusually religious and ostentatious in their church obligations—some of them even being ministers” (526).⁴¹ Historian Jeffrey Anderson adds that Voodoo practitioners recognized no conflict between their African-derived faith and Catholicism. In Africa, voodoo means “spirit” (xi). Anthropologists Jacobs and Kaslow add that white Louisianans’ fear of Voodoo practices resulted in its categorization as evil and unsafe, so in 1782, the colonial governor Bernardo de Gálvez banned importation of Martinique slaves, and police arrested blacks and placed restrictions on slave gatherings. Publicized documents on Voodoo practices sensationalized the religion as rife with savage acts involving blood, animal sacrifice, and sex. Thus, Voodoo “lost its religious character and assumed the form of an occult” (24-27). Gaines’s portrayal of hoodoo (a variant of the term Voodoo) women marks a return of the practice to its original form. Therefore, his “fake sorceresses” serve as further examples of his paradoxical handling of religion. Intermingled with potions, eerie surroundings, mystic attire, and rumors of hoodoo talent are basic religion-based marriage counseling and advice.

⁴¹ In *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (2003), Puckett mentions one New Orleans conjurer who advised a client that in order for a potion to be effective, the client had to be in a reverent frame of mind and deliver the concoction with a beginning and ending prayer: “Oh Lord, Good Shepherd, help me.” Another formula used with a “luck-ball” was “The God before me, God behind me, God be with me.” Yet another New Orleans hoodoo informed a client that to ensure success in courtship, he must always use the “Main Power,” God (562-63).

Fearing that a wild stallion will take her husband's life, Jane Pittman seeks the aid of Madame Eloise Gautier. Gautier plays the conjurer role well: she claims she was forced out of New Orleans by Marie Laveau (queen of the conjure women), and she wears purple satin and big earrings. The dark side of conjuration would emerge were it not for Gaines's suggestive clues to the contrary. Jane is skeptical of the woman's claims right away, and when Jane asks for a potion, Gautier randomly gives her one from the closest bottle. Critic Marcia Gaudet suggests that Jane's disbelief is an expression of folk culture: "one must believe in hoodoo for it to be effective" ("Folklore"13). While the premise is perhaps valid, here it is irrelevant because Gaines removes Gautier from the occult arena. To further debunk claims of supernatural power, Gaines grants Gautier insight based solely upon communal knowledge and common sense. Gautier is aware of Jane's barrenness. Therefore, since Joe cannot assert his manhood through the creation of progeny, he seeks another source, breaking horses. Gautier's "mystic vision" is merely psychological analysis of the male psyche: "Some go after lions, some run after every woman he sees, some ride wild horses'" (97). Additionally, the hoodoo's announcement of the future is vague, ambiguous, and somewhat humorous because of its general nature. Basically, Joe will die because everyone must die. She indicates that if Joe is "true," another horse will kill him. Contrarily, if he is not true, he could die from any factor, such as women, whisky, war, or the grippe, a condition Gautier cannot even define: "Grippe is grippe . . . Nothing like it" (98). The notion of being "true" suggests playful hoodoo babble, inserted for effect. Gautier's determination that Joe will not break the horse is based primarily on common sense: "Your Pittman has got old and fat now. Not the man

he think he is''' (99). Gautier merely addresses the natural order of existence. Her clients actually possess the same insight but look to her for "professional" verification. Having thoroughly disproved any evidence of hoodoo-derived discernment, Gaines exposes another layer of the conjurer's true image. Gautier becomes Christian counselor: "'So the next best thing, do what you can with the little time the Lord spares you. Most men feel they ought to spend them few years proving they men. They choose the foolishes' ways to do it'" (100). Again, Gautier's advice is grounded in wisdom of black culture and human nature tempered with religion.

Gautier does not represent an alternative to Christianity, but to distorted versions of Christianity that slave masters offered to slaves. Jane does not recognize Gautier's link to religion because Jane has not yet realized her own Christian yearning, which does not occur until she is older. As a general rule, Gaines's conjure women demonstrate an acute awareness of their environment and base their advice on a socio-religious standard designed to ensure communal harmony and survival. They guide with sound principles and use semblances of conjure to draw in clientele who may be wary of orthodox religion but need its guiding principles to ensure survival.

Like Gautier, Madame Toussaint of "A Long Day in November" offers more marital counseling than conjuring. And like her counterpart, Toussaint realizes immediately that Eddie seeks to declare his manhood through connection with a symbol of masculinity. Whereas for Joe Pitman it is his ability to break wild stallions, for Eddie it is his car. Initially, Gaines also introduces Toussaint as a feared entity, only to reveal her true identity as the tale unfolds. Eddie fears the "witch" will put a mark on him or

turn him into a frog. Toussaint discloses that her primary business is not witchcraft, but rendering sound advice to married men:

“Lately I’ve been having men dropping in three times a day. All of them just like you. What they can do to make their wives love them more. What they can do to keep their wives from running round with some other man. What they can do to make their wives give in. What they can do to make their wives scratch their backs. What they can do to make their wives look at them when they talking to her.” (50)

Toussaint does not provide magic powders or incantations to her clients; instead, she advises them to engage in more intimacy, be kind to their wives, or spend more time at home. The reader is left to wonder why Toussaint is even considered a conjure woman by the locals. Juxtaposing Toussaint and Reverend Simmons does not serve the purpose of presenting Toussaint as an alternative to Christianity, for her advice is founded on religious principle. More importantly to my designation of Simmons as a folktale preacher, Toussaint also contributes to the comedic element of the story as a frustrated Eddie seeks varied solutions to his marital problems.

When Eddie seeks financial assistance to pay Toussaint’s fee, Gaines validates Toussaint as a viable spiritual adviser. Eddie borrows the money from Brother Howard, an avid church attendee who reveres God. Howard’s value system prevents him from loaning money for sinful intent such as “wasting it on women or drink” (56), but he has no problem loaning Eddie funds to give to Toussaint. When Toussaint advises Howard on marital relations, he does not wholeheartedly accept the advice, but turns to God for guidance: “I asked God to show me the way—to tell me what to do. And He did, he surely did (57). Toussaint’s advice results in enhanced relations between Howard and his

wife. Noticeably, through Howard, Gaines attributes his guidance to God as the higher authority, not Toussaint: ““And I’m doing exactly what He said”” (57). Gaines casts Toussaint in an emissary role, not as an alternative to God.

Later, Eddie and Sonny further validate Toussaint as a positive when they include her in their family rituals, including prayer: ““And God bless Johnny Green and Madame Toussaint”” (77). Considered thusly, Gaines is not negating Christianity with his use of the hoodoo woman. Instead, Gaines has successfully reestablished her as a venue by which people can find their way back to Christianity or to strengthen their faith in God. To emphasize the Christian element, Gaines concludes the short story with the family engaged in several instances of religious meditation. Though Eddie does not visibly pray, his diligence in overseeing Sonny’s prayers is indicative of a prayerful nature. Toussaint, in the role of spiritual sage, has utilized sound doctrine grounded in Christian principles to strengthen familial bonds.

It is also significant that Gaines casts a female in the role of religious leader, for it is one historically reserved for men. Gaines’s assignment addresses shifts in modern-day religious thought regarding the role of females. The story is set in the late 1960s, and historian Jackson Carroll adds that from 1930 to 1980, the movement of both black and white women into the professional ministry increased 240 percent (4). Historians Lincoln and Mamiya attribute the change in female church leadership to historical factors. First, the postwar proliferation of Christian churches in the 1950s led to an expanded need for professional clergy. Next, the black consciousness movement of the 1960s encouraged black leadership, and the feminist movement of the early 1970s initiated a quest for

equality in various arenas (297-98). The theme of Gaines's short story is establishment of Eddie's manhood; however, the author promotes a focus on both religious thought and the role of women as contributing factors. Following Toussaint's guidance, Eddie resolves his familial discord by ridding himself of the secular manifestation of materialism, specifically by burning his car, and retreating to the comfort of a religious home setting.

Madame Toussaint makes another appearance in "My Grandpa and the Haint" in the collection, *Mozart and Leadbelly*. Bobby and Pap, his grandfather, share a love of fishing; however, Pap has an ulterior motive for the frequent outings. On the way home, he stops to engage in an adulterous liaison with Miss Molly Bee. After Bobby cleverly divulges facts of the visits to his grandmother (Mom), she pays a visit to Madame Toussaint. Gaines offers no details regarding the consult other than an implicit acknowledgement of what the conjure woman advises. When Pap departs for a day of fishing, Mom instructs Bobby to watch a woodpecker in the tree. He is to wait for the bird to leave, count to thirty, and then find his grandmother. Gaughan suggests that the secret details of the meeting add "more mystery to the magical conjurings" (39-40). In most cultural folklore, the woodpecker symbolizes prophecy, magic, and power, so it is, indeed, a suitable choice for inclusion in hoodoo play (Puckett 204, 511). Paradoxically, along with the symbolic evil representation of the woodpecker, Gaines adds another folklore element related to Christianity. According to Udo Becker, authority on symbols and semiotics, the woodpecker symbolizes unrelenting prayer because of its constant pecking. Likewise, Becker adds that the woodpecker is representative of Christ because it

kills worms, linked to snakes and, therefore, the devil (333). With the incorporation of the woodpecker, Gaines simultaneously exposes the flawed representation of hoodoo and adds an emblematic touch that furthers the argument that hidden in writing seemingly opposed to Christian values lies a plethora of Christian allusions.

I agree with Gaughan that Gaines “presents Madame Toussaint’s magic as a viable, legitimate alternative to more modern options” (44). However, her “magic” is insight, not sorcery. As in “A Long Day in November,” Toussaint’s credibility as a hoodoo woman is challenged by circumstantial evidence. It is no secret that Miss Molly Bee fits the designation of loose or fallen woman since even the local children are aware of her “many boyfriends” and that she “liked Pap the most” (115). Thus, during Mom’s visit to her, Toussaint probably only confirms facts everyone else has long known and of which Mom has just become aware. As “old hoo-doo lady” (122), Toussaint possesses the insight of Gaines’s other seniors, specifically, the elderly preachers such as Armstrong and Ambrose. Because Gaines’s seniors exhibit an acute awareness of all occurrences that could negatively affect communal relations, they can offer sound advice on the course of action best suited for the circumstance.

Thus, Toussaint plays an active role in Pap’s metaphorical “Come to Jesus” moment, the change in his sinful ways. After Mom and Bobby find Pap tangled in barbed wire, he shares a surreal tale of an encounter with a “demon” snake. The snake chases the old adulterer, drives him into the barbed wire, and commences to beat him. Needless to say, the alleged attacker appears to be a fake planted by Toussaint or, perhaps, the manifestation of a guilty conscience. Surely, Pap is keen enough to realize

that Mom is suspicious of his actions. She strongly suggests that he select an alternate fishing site, and she will no longer allow Bobby to accompany him. Regardless, it is safe to conjecture that Toussaint's cleverness is the catalyst for Pap's fear-driven trek across the pasture. At the tale's end, Pap acknowledges her involvement in his changed behavior:

“Ehh, y'all sure think you smart, huh?” he said.
“Who, Pap?” I said.
“Madame Toussaint. Who else?” he said. (128)

Pap's use of “y'all” is negated by his singular response of “Madame Toussaint.” Dramatic irony renders Pap ignorant of the hoodoo's active involvement in his conversion from adulterer to family man. Meanwhile, the reader, apprised of the absence of supernatural properties, delights in the humorous dénouement.

Gaines, utilizing his storyteller skills, incorporates a tale within the tale, also involving Toussaint's supposed magic. One of her chickens allegedly speaks to C. Hugh, another adulterer, scaring him so badly that he, like Pap, runs all the way to the quarters as he calls upon God to keep everything out of his path. Similarly, Pap calls upon God during his encounter, ““Lord have mercy,’ I say. ‘This is the devil? This is the devil?’”(126). The similarities in the tales suggest that both men courted Miss Molly Bee, and Toussaint scares them back onto the proverbial straight-and-narrow path of good behavior. With Madame Toussaint, Gaines conflates folklore and religion. The intent, however, is not to recommend a new religion or devalue Christianity or Christian

principles. Instead, Gaines showcases conjure as yet another element of African American culture that is indelibly linked to religion.

Both the preacher tale and the conjure tale are forms of artistic expression that demonstrate and preserve aspects of the African-American folk experience. The cleric of the preacher tale complemented his real-life counterpart as a vehicle by which people could lampoon the preachers' mannerisms, speaking styles, and shortcomings but with a good-humored air which thwarted offense. Because the ministry was the first established Negro group, the clergy emerged as supreme among other professions (Mays and Nicholson 38). Thus, the preacher tale serves as a form of reverence of an established leader. Gaines's folk preachers are made even more humorous because of the serious demeanors they assume. Like the preacher tale, the conjure tale is an entertainment tool, whether in the vein of humor or fright inducement.⁴² However, conjure tales also had a psychological value; they were a means for the downtrodden or enslaved to exert power over oppressors as in Chesnut's conjure stories or to escape the oppressive circumstance completely. With his conjure women, Gaines includes characteristics of both the historical hoodoo and the archetypal conjure woman. His characterization, however, presents them as religious counselors who espouse communal wisdom. With his preacher and conjure tales, Gaines successfully preserves key components of the folk tradition as products of religion, not as testaments to its lack of worth.

⁴² In her essay "Folklore and Music" (1938), Zora Neale Hurston writes: "The Negro is determined to laugh even if he has to laugh at his own expense. By the same token, he spares nobody else. His world is dissolved in laughter. His 'bossman,' his woman, his preacher, his jailer, his God, and himself, all must be baptized in the stream of laughter" (875).

CHAPTER VI
NEW-AGE APOSTLES

“Men’s ears are delighted with new things.”

*Pliny*⁴³

“There is no new thing under the sun.”

*Ecclesiastes 1:9*⁴⁴

Prevalent in Gaines’s fiction is a connection between his characters and African American religious traditions: family involvement and commitment, rituals, belief systems, symbols, teachings, and social events. Similar to Gaines, ingrained in the writing of many African Americans who broach the topic of religion is the notion that white society destroyed or negatively impacted black religion.⁴⁵ The theory has foundation in the slave tradition in which slaveholders compelled their slaves to abandon practice of their native religion and embrace the religion of the masters. The practice guaranteed inferior status and further oppression of the enslaved through biblical interpretations that promoted slaveholding and servitude. Historian Kenneth Stampp points out that slaveholders were aware of the impact of religion on slaves, so a “carefully censored version of Christianity” was the key to ensuring the suppression of

⁴³ *Epistles*, Book 8, Epistle 18. Quoted in *The Macmillan Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases*, p. 1680.

⁴⁴ *King James Bible*

⁴⁵ See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Also, DuBois incorporates such thinking in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903). Defining the Negro as a “religious animal” (153), DuBois dissects the historical and sociological circumstances that impact the Negro’s spiritual nature. DuBois states that slaves called upon their African religion to exorcise the “dark triumph of evil over him.” In spite of such efforts, slaves succumbed to the passive submission embodied in white man’s Christianity (154-55).

pent-up rage. Slaveholders deleted any biblical passage that might provoke insurrection (159-60). In fiction that features the trials of the elderly, Gaines promotes the premise of such white destruction of black religion. One example appears in *A Gathering of Old Men*. As the elderly men air their long list of grievances, one of them laments the loss of the church: ““You can’t see the church with the people, and you can’t hear the singing and the praying. You had to be here then to be able to don’t see it and don’t hear it now”” (92). Johnny Paul is not merely bemoaning the loss of one particular church; he speaks holistically of the loss of a way of life. The emotional rhetoric highlights the depth of the loss to blacks who struggled to maintain a connection to ancestry. Thus, a key consequence was the reconceptualization of religion, one that spoke specifically to black needs and circumstance and stood as an opposing factor to traditional religious dogma.

Gaines, continuing his schema of promoting Christianity in a manner designed for a modern readership, raises a flock of new preachers who would never categorize themselves as such since most consider themselves atheists or mistrust orthodox religion. However, juxtaposition of the actions, mannerisms, and techniques employed by traditional and contemporary African-American preachers with Gaines’s didactic characters reveals striking similarities. In his writing, Gaines utilizes modern circumstances but exhorts tradition through a reliance on black church conventions. Thus, Munford Bazille, Gaines’s prison sermonizer and convicted killer in “Three Men,” easily serves as the model for Henry Mitchell’s sociological study *Black Preaching* in which Mitchell details the common characteristics or “stylistic features” of the black preacher. Juxtaposition of preacher characteristics and techniques with Bazille’s language and

mannerisms reveals another layer of Gaines's rhetorical manipulation. The linguistic angling results in the deliverance of a morality lesson from a recidivistic murderer. The message is rendered more profound based on its paradoxical packaging.

According to Mitchell, the black preacher never starts the message proper without the attention of the audience. This attention hinges upon the establishment of a rapport, an in-depth, intimate fellowship, and the utilized technique depends upon previous conditioning (185-86). Munford Bazille establishes a rapport with his primary audience Proctor Lewis, his cellmate, by setting up the dynamics of Proctor's flawed existence, one that will ensure repeated returns to prison. Munford questions Proctor's familial and financial status and learns Proctor's only family member is an uncle, and the youth is poor. Munford response is his version of sympathetic compassion: "That's bad" (135). Next, he offers psychological assistance, "Best to talk 'bout it' Munford said. 'Keeping it in just makes it worse'"(136). Once he has Proctor's attention, Munford establishes a common bond: "Been going in and out of these jails here, I don't know how long,' Munford said. 'Forty, fifty years. Started out just like you—kilt a boy just like you did last night. Kilt him and got off—got off scot-free'" (137). Though Proctor does not desire to compare himself to a hated killer, Munford has established through ethos an authoritative voice and presence that Proctor cannot ignore. Proctor, if he continues on his current path of immoral and criminal behavior, is destined to become a despised, hardened manifestation of societal corruption just like Munford. Munford's use of ethos guarantees he will maintain Proctor's attention as a captive congregant.

Mitchell also delineates the purpose of the black preacher. He is not “an Army officer ordering men to their death. Rather he is a crucial witness declaring how men ought to *live*” (203). The purpose of Munford’s sermon is to use his life as an example for the rising generation, youths such as Proctor who are destined to follow in Munford’s footsteps. Bazille explains, “I kept on getting in trouble, and they kept on getting me off. . . . Then I realized they kept getting me off because they needed a Munford Bazille. They need me to prove they human—just like they need that thing [Hattie] over there” (137). Though Munford accepts his role in society and will not, or as implied, cannot deviate from it, he also realizes that if he does not do his part to thwart the creation of an army of Munford Bazilles, the black community will face enhanced degradation and oppression. Noticeably, Munford includes Hattie’s homosexuality as one of the representative negatives of society. This negation further aligns him with the Christian preacher of the period who defined homosexuality as an offense against God’s plan for humankind. Many church leaders use scripture to challenge homosexuality, viewing it as an abomination.⁴⁶ Psychologist Frances Welsing attributes heightened disapproval of homosexuality in the black community to various factors. For instance, many Blacks view homosexuality as an affront to the struggle for manhood against white supremacy that has existed from slavery to modern day. Homosexuality represents white-cultivated effeminacy as a form of oppression that destroys black families by hampering procreation (82-84). Gaines treats all of his homosexual characters as outcasts; John and Freddy of *Of*

⁴⁶ “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination” (Leviticus 18:22) and “For this cause God gave them up unto vile affectations; for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward the other; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet” (Romans 1:26-27).

Love and Dust are referred to as punks whose giggling reminds the narrator of “two perfumed gals going to a dance” (33). Likewise, Jane Pittman chastises a gay youth as a sissy, and Munford and Proctor refer to Hattie as a bitch and a freak. Thus, assuming the morality lesson of the typical black preacher, Munford’s goal is to break vicious cycles in the black community, which include his animalistic behavior and Hattie’s “perverted” sexuality.

Next, Mitchell explains the nuances of the black sermon, all evidenced in Munford’s neo sermon. A traditional means of incorporating rhythm into a sermon is the use of call and response in which the preacher’s statement elicits a trained response from the congregation:

Preacher: “God is good.”
Congregation: “All the time.”
Preacher: “And all the time.”
Congregation: “God is good.”

In many sermons, the preacher takes compulsory pauses to allow for audience participation. In his speech, Munford expounds on the nature of black and white relations. Continuing the topic of his sermon, Munford defines the white-generated degradation of blacks as an offshoot of white decadence: “‘Cut any of them open and you see if you don’t find Munford Bazille or Hattie Brown there’” (138). After making what he knows to be an insightful “congregation-stirring” statement, preacherly Munford expects a verbal response from the listening, but silent Proctor:

“Well?” he said.
“Yeah”

“Then answer me when I ask you a question. I don’t like talking to myself.”
(138)

Munford needs verbal assurance that Proctor receives and understands the message. His question to Proctor is rhetorical: “‘Cause animals can fuck, can kill, can fight—you know that?’” (138). Thus, a call-and-response-type follow up would have sufficed. Proctor’s “yeah” serves the same purpose as a congregational “amen.” Additionally, Munford becomes excited and winded during his speech: “He had worked himself up so much, he had to stop and catch his breath” (140). Like the traditional preacher, Munford uses the breaks between call and response for both audience participation and personal rest.

Mitchell notes that the black preacher who combines imaginative role-playing and dramatization usually succeeds at holding the audience’s attention and thereby uplifting the congregants (169). Munford’s diatribe against the pedophilic black preacher forms the climax of his sermon. Though it is psychologically impossible that he can recall the event, Munford shares a tale that he claims happened when he was three months old. The preacher who is preparing to christen Munford leans in to perform oral sex on him. The preacher, as illustrated, is Gaines’ insertion of a symbolic representation of a racist society’s devaluation of black men. Promoting white hegemony, society exploits the black man, resulting in flawed perceptions of black manhood and black sexuality.⁴⁷

Munford includes homosexuality in this dynamic. He continues:

⁴⁷ In “On Black Sexuality” (2000), philosopher and activist Cornel West argues that “white fear of black sexuality is a basic ingredient of white racism.” West links black sexuality to Black Power, an unacceptable, frightening circumstance for a white-run society (517).

“But they don’t stop there, they stay after you. If they miss you in the cradle, they catch you some other time. And when they catch you, they draw it out of you or they make you a beast—make you use it in a brutish way. You use it on a woman without caring for her, you use it on children, you use it on other men, you use it on yourself. Then when you get so disgusted with everything round you, you kill.” (140)

Since Munford escapes the brunt of society’s negatives when he is a child, it is his lot that he is assailed as an adult. Society makes him a killer and renders him a perpetual victim. Munford’s use of graphic sardonic humor reinforces the depth of his message and renders it memorable: “He was serious as he could ever get” (140). In true preacher fashion, Munford’s imaginative insertion is the perfect segue to the heart of the message: “‘And next year you’ll kill another old nigger. ‘Cause they grow niggers just to be killed, and they grow niggers like you to kill’em. That’s all part of the—the culture’” (142). Proctor must glean from the sermon the dangers of maintaining the status quo. As a new-age preacher, Munford presents a guidebook, his personal bible, for achieving and asserting manhood.

The speech also makes use of the “rhetorical flair” that Mitchell acknowledges as a feature of the black sermon. Mitchell concludes that in “truly Black preaching,” repetition is frequently used, and black audiences do not consider it condescending when the preacher repeats words or sentences (168). Munford’s use of repetition (kill, killed, kill-em, and culture) and aphoristic statements (“And every man got to play his part in the culture, or the culture don’t go on”) highlight his point. Culture, or the nature of current society, must be killed, or all black men will die a symbolic death as evidenced by Munford’s very existence. Mitchell adds that the “response of the Black audience to

aphorisms is much greater than is customary in other churches” (176). Thus, even the inexperienced nineteen-year-old Proctor can grasp the meaning of Munford’s definitive speech.

Next, Mitchell analyzes the distinctive nature of the sermon’s climax. To achieve climax, the preacher shifts from “objective fact to subjective testimony” (188). Munford has explained the means by which Proctor can proclaim his manhood: ““You go [to prison] saying ‘Go fuck yourself, Roger Medlow, I want to be a man, and by God I will be a man. For once in my life I will be a man’” (141). He then shifts to personal circumstance: ““And you look much brighter than I did at your age. But I guess every man must live his own life. I wish I had mine to live all over again”” (141). Munford has not only framed his tale by returning to the sermon’s purpose (how to live one’s life), but also he has used his own experiences to move his audience to conviction. Mitchell contends that laying bare one’s soul “affirms the preacher’s personhood in a positive, healing catharsis” (189). Munford’s silence as he stares out the window suggests that he, like the silent Proctor, is engaged in pensive self-reflection regarding his life. Munford thus brings his sermon to a close. He offers a concluding thought, tips his derby, and departs, for his work is done. The preacher’s primary responsibility is to relay the “word”; it is up to the congregation to accept or reject it.

Lastly, Mitchell offers that a “good Black climax will appeal to the highest and noblest emotions of a man” (195). Munford Bazille is, undoubtedly, a skilled rhetor. With Bazille, Gaines is able to relay a message of black manhood, utilizing a tried and proven form, the emotion-filled sermon. Gaines even concludes his prison sermon with a timely

rendering from the choir: “Hattie started singing. He was singing a spiritual and he was singing it in a high-pitched voice like a woman” (143). Proctor uses the time following the sermon to reflect on Munford’s speech, contemplating its relevance and determining the course he must now set for his life. Gaines has effectively shaken the expectations of his modern audience, for he has incorporated the salient features of traditional black worship into a prison sermon using an unreformed felon as the orator.

Charlie Biggs of *A Gathering of Old Men* resembles Munford in his role as black sermonizer. Like Munford, Charlie learns and shares the means by which to attain manhood. The difference between the two apostles, however, is Gaines’s detailed incorporation of Christianity as a contributing factor by which to arrive at and express black manhood. Charlie’s defiant act of killing his white oppressor establishes the story’s plot. Charlie kills Beau Boutan, a racist Cajun, and then flees, driven by fear of death at the hands of white authorities who will not accept a claim of self-defense. However, Charlie’s developing sense of manhood will not allow him to continue running. Up to this point, running away has been the emasculated man’s escape from his very existence. His revelation of his new self allows the preacherly elements to emerge.

Like Munford Bazille, Charlie relays a message regarding Christian principle to a captive congregation utilizing the rhetoric and mannerisms of the black preacher. Gaines even sets the stage for consideration of Charlie’s speech as a new-age sermon:

I saw his round black sweaty face twitching, then trembling, and he stopped pacing the floor and raised those two big tree limbs up over his head, and, like some overcome preacher behind the pulpit, he cried out: “But they comes a day! They comes a day when a man must be a man. They comes a day.” (189)

Again using rhetorical manipulation, Gaines grants an authoritative narrative voice to the individual least expected to assume it. Despite all the heroic males present in the novel, Charlie assumes the challenging role, for he needs to make the transition from frightened boy to empowered man. Charlie displays preacher mannerisms while simultaneously giving the topic of his sermon. Charlie has already commanded the attention of his audience. The men, women, and children in the room are riveted in place. When Sheriff Mapes attempts to disperse them, they press in closer pleading, “‘Don’t start till I get back, hear, Charlie?’” (187). Like the folk preacher, Charlie relies upon repetition to make his point. He repeats key passages: “I’m a man,” “He ‘bused me,” and especially “They comes a day,” the line which punctuates the entire speech. Charlie is quite effective in his delivery: “You could have heard hearts beat in that room” (191) as he appropriates the cadence of the black sermon.

The moment of catharsis in Charlie’s tale occurs when he realizes that he can no longer run away. He describes being hindered by psychological entities everywhere he runs:

“Something like a wall, a wall I couldn’t see, but it stopped me every time. I fell on the ground and screamed and screamed. I bit in the ground. I got a handful of dirt and stuffed in my mouth, trying to kill myself. . . . Sometime round sundown—no, just ‘fore sundown, I heard a voice calling my name.” (192)

It is quite appropriate to conclude, as Gaines's critics do, that the voice Charlie hears is the subconscious cry of budding manhood.⁴⁸ However, substantiated evidence of Christian rebirth also exists. Jill Owens calls Charlie a Christ figure because he is a scapegoat who signals the new dispensation of power, represents the obsequious and downtrodden, and dies beatified (150). Otherwise, Gaines's critics generally overlook the features of Christianity in the scene. Gaines uses the imagery of falling in the same manner as applied to Reverend Martin in *In My Father's House*. At his lowest moment, Charlie is literally on the ground cowering in fear. When he falls to the ground a second time, this literal fall, which embodies a psychological lowliness in self esteem and self-worth, invokes a spiritual rising.

Gaines incorporates dialogue which suggests Charlie is driven by a rebirth inspired by Christianity: "There was something in his face that you see in faces of people who have just found religion. It was a look of having been freed of this world" (193). As additional evidence, Charlie's movement from "nigger boy" to man is heavily couched in the rhetoric of Christian rebirth: "I done dropped a heavy load'" (193). The allusion to common scripture regarding the Lord's promise to serve as burden bearer supports the theory that Gaines is incorporating a religious theme.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Gaines has already injected the notion that Charlie possesses a religious nature. Charlie prays during his ecstatic dramatization, prone on the ground as he eats dirt. I disagree with Papa's

⁴⁸ See Suzanne Jones, "Reconstructing Manhood"; Keith Clark, Re-(W)righting Black Male Subjectivity"; and Joseph Griffin, "Calling, Naming, and Coming of Age in Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*."

⁴⁹ "Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee" (Psalms 55:22); "And it shall come to pass in that day, *that* his burden shall be taken away from off thy shoulder, and his yoke from off thy neck, and the yoke shall be destroyed because of the anointing" (Isaiah 10: 27); "To undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke" (Isaiah 58: 6).

interpretation of this scene as emblematic of a “new religion . . . found in the earth, in the ground” (188). Instead, it is yet another biblical allusion, the birth of Adam/ mankind, which further complements the theme of Charlie as a new man. The “Book of Genesis” depicts the creation of Adam: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (2:7). The difference is that in Gaines’s novel, the catalyst for the birth of a man is resistance to racism. Therefore, the biblical allusion positions the reborn Charlie as the biblical Adam, a new man who is self reliant and self-motivated.

More definitive proof of Charlie’s experience as a spiritual rebirth emerges upon comparison of the incident to the conversion of Saul of the New Testament. Saul, too, falls to the earth upon hearing the voice of God calling his name: “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (Acts 9: 4). Likewise, Charlie’s call is also his acknowledgement of the moment of transformation in the conduct of his life: ““But I knowed that voice was calling me back here’” (193). Upon his conversion, Saul, now Paul, will no longer persecute Christians. He returns to the city where he is baptized and later departs to preach the Gospel. Saul’s name change finds parallel in Gaines’ story also. Mapes no longer refers to Charlie as such but applies a new appellation to the new man: ““After you, Mr. Biggs’” (193). Though Charlie’s declaration is the achievement of manhood, it is a manhood established utilizing religious concepts and vocalized in homiletic rhetoric.

I argue that such links to scripture challenge Papa’s notion of the formation of a “new communal religion” (192) as a result of Charlie’s conversion. Papa suggests the new religion forms when the residents touch Charlie’s body in hope that “some of the

stuff he had found back there in the swamps might rub off” (210). The scene, instead, is yet another biblical allusion, a Gainesian reworking of the resurrection of Lazarus.

Charlie’s rebirth and death inspire the members of the community just as Lazarus’ rebirth from a physical death inspires the Jews. They flock to be near him, and “by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus” (John 12:11). The Jews want the spirituality that has raised Lazarus to “rub off” on them. Even in death, Charlie exudes strength and courage. His trek through the swamps establishes the same connection to the ancestors that the men garner in the cemetery as they look to the past and prepare to face their common foe.

Prior to his death, Charlie, utilizing the tactics of the black preacher, concludes his sermon with an appeal to a high and noble emotion of man: “Charlie grinned—a great, big, wide-mouth, big-teeth grin. It was a deep, all-heart, true grin, a grin from a man who had been a boy fifty years” (193). The emotional appeal is ennobling as it pertains to both black mankind and achievement of a higher spiritual plane. Charlie’s manhood is thus firmly linked to Christianity: “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Cor 13:11). In *What is Cool?*, a sociological study of black manhood, Marlene Connor defines the sixties, the period in which the novel is set, as a time of self discovery and self-awareness. Blacks began to learn and appreciate their history, which allowed them to conquer fears of their past and fears of white society that had been falsely instilled in them to enslave them (47). Through Charlie’s transformation, Gaines defines manhood in a similar manner. Charlie overcomes the world in a physical and spiritual sense. Gaines

uses the same definition of manhood as he does in *A Lesson Before Dying*; the complete man asserts his power in the face of oppression and can draw strength from religion to do so.

Charlie is but one of Gaines's characters who undergoes a form of rebirth in the novel. Clearly, several of the old men of the novel have grown up under the auspices of traditional Christian values. They pray at the graves of ancestors, quote scripture, and call upon God for mercy. Yet their lives have demonstrated that strict adherence to key Christian principles will retain them in a perpetual state of oppression. The result is not a rejection of Christianity on Gaines's part, but a viable redefining of principles as applicable to an oppressed race. Mapes's interrogation of Uncle Billy is a prime example. After Billy insists that he committed the murder, the sheriff asks, "If I got a Bible, would you still say you shot Beau, Uncle Billy?" (78). The question poses a spiritual dilemma for Billy, but after a moment of consideration, he maintains his guilt. Billy's motive for his stance is his son, who was beaten into a state of insanity by Beau's family. Billy deviates from orthodox to redefined Christianity:

"I don't hold no grudge. My Bible tells me not to hold no grudge."

"Your Bible also tells you thou shalt not kill."

"Yes, sir. It does."

"Well?"

"Sometimes you just has to go against your Bible, Sheriff." (81)

Mapes's attempt to use the Bible to force the truth from Billy is Gaines's modern rendering of slave masters' misuse of the Bible to promote their agendas. Regarded superficially, it appears Billy accepts components of the Bible that support his actions

while rejecting those that do not. Contrarily, Billy embraces the testament as it applies to justice and uplift. There can be no holistic application of biblical principles in an unjust society that subverts any attempts to establish racial harmony and equality. Billy's logic effectively counters Mapes's exploitation of the Bible, so there is yet another victory for the seniors who recognize the error of "white man's" religion.

Like the other men in the story, Mathu undergoes a religious transformation at the novel's end: "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'" (182). Mathu's redemption results from the African American men's display of biblical principles as they were meant to be used. Black liberation theologian James Cone explains that "[r]eligion is not a set of beliefs that people memorize and neither is it an ethical code of do's and don't that they learn from others. Rather religion is wrought out of the experience of people who encounter the divine in the midst of historical realities" ("The Spirituals" 29-30). Mathu is transformed by the brand of Christianity that Charlie experiences through commune with a higher power, Christianity in its truest form and the form of Christianity that Gaines promotes in all of his fiction.

Another of Gaines's new-age prophets is Ned Douglass, Jane Pittman's activist son. Unlike Charlie, Ned is an activist for equal rights, and addressing civil liberties as a platform seems to be his calling. However, Gaines also turns to preacherly techniques and scripture to establish a voice for Ned. Ned has previously left his home to attend college, but his return differs from Jackson Bradley's, Grant Wiggins's, and Jimmy

Aaron's. Ned is a messiah type who realizes his calling to "deliver" blacks in his hometown from their oppressive circumstance. Thus, it is appropriate that Gaines endows Ned with the attributes of speech and style that appeal to his congregation.

Ned does not declare himself a preacher; nevertheless, his speech to the masses at the river is distinctively parallel to Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." Wertheim briefly likens Ned's speech to Christ's sermon because Ned offers a "prognostication of the future," and Ned's death links him to Christian martyrs (227). However, the speeches are quite similar in a structure and context. Gaines employs his brand of rhetorical manipulation to modernize the sermon without compromising its alignment with the biblical ur-text. Still, subtly incorporated into Ned's speech are nuances of language that establish a voice specifically for African Americans. Jesus begins with the Beatitudes, the blessings for the faithful: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (Mat 5: 4) and "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake'" (Mat 5: 11). Similarly, Ned begins: "This earth is yours and don't let that man out there take it from you," he said. "It's yours because your people's bones lays in it; it's yours because their sweat and their blood done drenched this earth'" (112). Ned's injunction converts the syntax of the biblical text but without altering the meaning of the contextual message. However, instead of a stance of total passivity in claiming one's rights (they shall inherit), the same claim is made with an active admonition (don't let that man out there take it). Ned's adjustment renders the statement a suggestive rallying cry. Instead of waiting to be further reviled and persecuted, the people must assume some form of self-defense.

Next, both men exhort their audience to avoid judging others, especially those who are evil or unrighteous, for doing so will prevent the listeners from acquiring their destined rewards. Jesus speaks: “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Mat 5: 20). Jesus denounces the scribes and the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, selfishness, ostentatious behavior, and self-exaltation. Yet he commands, “Whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works; for they say and do not” (Mat 23:3). Basically, the doctrine the Pharisees relayed was valid, yet they failed to conduct themselves accordingly. Yet, some Pharisees such as Nicodemus⁵⁰ and Gamaliel⁵¹ actually worked to promote Christian piety. Ned, likewise, declares in his “sermon” that his listeners should not believe those who say all white men are bad. In fact, white men have kept several of them alive. Ned informs his listeners that their plight is the result of ignorance on the part of both blacks and whites when the first blacks were taken from Africa. The parallel language advising against engagement in judgmental behavior retains the like messages of both sermons. Still, Ned’s penultimate line on the subject, “I myself probably’ll be killed by a white man,” suggests that whites are not necessarily absolved of any judgment cast upon them.

The remainder of Jesus’ sermon involves principles of living by which His followers are to conduct their daily activities. Jesus commands the multitude to uphold their beliefs in God against people and circumstances opposed to godly principles: “Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him

⁵⁰ John 3:1

⁵¹ Acts 5:34

unto a wise man” (Mat 7: 24). Ned, again, follows suit, but his speech specifically targets whites who do not uphold godly principles, not all people in general. His final plan of action is preparation for rebellion should the white man deem blacks must ““leave this country or die in it” (117). Ned inspires racial pride and challenges his listeners to defend it at all costs: ““Show them, warriors, the difference between black men and niggers” (117). Ned counters Booker T. Washington’s program of black uplift by suggesting that instead of accepting lowly positions delegated to them, blacks should engage in professions such as lawyers, ministers, and writers. The sermons end with parallel responses from the audiences: ““And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he had taught them as one having authority” (Mat 7: 28-29). Gaines offers the same: ““Everybody was quiet, thinking ‘bout what he had said” (118). Ned, like Jesus, is the voice of authority offering advice designed to overcome conflict and adversarial forces.

Where Lee Papa sees Ned as the facilitator of a new religion, I argue that Ned is firmly adhering to orthodox Christian principles. Papa suggests that because the sermon makes no reference to the Christian God, Ned creates an “earthly religion” (190). However, before Ned utters a word, his first act is to involve everyone in a communal prayer: ““He told us to kneel while he prayed” (112). Papa also conflates the Christian notion of “earthliness” as it applies to secularity and as it applies to God’s fulfillment of personal needs. First of all, Ned’s claiming of the earth is a statement concerning reparations, not a suggestion to disregard the afterlife. Inheriting the earth refers to receipt of earthly endowments. Thus, Gaines’s reworking of the scripture “Blessed are

the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Mat 5:5) contradicts Papa’s assertion that Christianity does not “admit the earthly” (190). Ned’s message is not far removed from the biblical sermon; blacks are the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the persecuted, and the reviled, etc. Ned’s failure to focus on a heavenly reward, the primary difference between the two speeches, does not negate adherence to the biblical principles. It is a prescribed standard by which to conduct one’s life on earth, just like the “Sermon on the Mount.”

Additionally, with its many references to the bones of ancestors, Ned’s speech contains a message akin to that of Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones. The parallel messages further link Ned to Christianity and contradict claims of Gaines’s mistrust of religion. After transporting Ezekiel to the valley filled with bones, God asks him if the bones can live. Next, God adds sinews and flesh to the bones and commands the wind to give them breath. Symbolically, the newly risen represent God’s promise to free the persecuted Israelites from exile and return them to Israel. Ned offers a comparable message of deliverance. Blacks will receive their birthright, their claim to the lands on which they reside, by virtue of all the ancestors who struggled and died there: “‘It’s yours because your people’s bones lays in it; it’s yours because their sweat and their blood done drenched this earth’” (112). Ned’s promises amount to new life and a better future for the next generation. His speech, illustrating the parallel structure and repetition of the typical black sermon, abounds in Christian rhetoric although his subject is equal rights.

The final parallel involves full equality for all citizens. God’s next promise to Ezekiel is that one king will govern the Israelites: “‘and they shall be no more two

nations’” (Eze 37:22). Ned, likewise, preaches equality under one government: “[W]hile you’re here, don’t let no man tell you the best is for him and you take the scrap” (113). Gaines applies the notion of a divided nation to the turmoil of the United States during the earliest period of the Civil Rights Movement. Societal concepts of inequality and segregation basically divided the country into two nations, one for blacks and one for whites. Again, Gaines has utilized biblical text and symbolism as a means by which to codify modern standards of conduct. Ned does not need a vision from God and does not have to mention God in order to establish a Christian foundation for his words. Enough parallels exist to argue that the inspired congregation of young followers at the river and the spiritual rebirth in the valley of dry bones are indicators of a national resurrection instigated by the oppressed.

Gaines’s new apostles do not always demonstrate the expressive vocalicity of Munford Bazille, Charlie Biggs, and Ned Douglass. Actually, the new apostle whom Gaines uses to make the most definitive statement about Christianity is Marcus Payne in *Of Love and Dust*. Despite his role as protagonist, he is one of the least vocal characters in the novel. Gaines employs the use of a silent rhetoric to impart Christian standards. In an unexpected twist, Gaines’s technique is to repeatedly juxtapose Marcus’s scandalous, inappropriate actions with church activity, and together they promote Christian morals through a sordid love story. The rhetorical manipulation entails creating an authoritative voice for Marcus that emerges without reliance on spoken language. Still, his silent ministry is quite effective in relaying biblical principles of moral conduct.

Ironically, the longest conversation in which Marcus engages concerns the circumstances that compel him to sever all ties with the church. Marcus's family introduces him to the church at an early age, and he embraces Christianity. Acquaintances even establish that his calling is to be a preacher. When Marcus later becomes a victim of workplace extortion, he seeks aid from Jesus. Marcus prays daily, but to no avail. The youth finally makes a desperate plea in church, "Jesus, please make Big Red stop taking my money" (251). The result is humiliation when the entire congregation erupts in a fit of laughing hysteria. Big Red attempts to extort even more money because Marcus had the audacity to talk "to a Jew" (252). The stereotypical notion of "being Jewed down" adds yet another element of negativity to Marcus's plight. He concludes that Jesus cannot or will not aid him.

Gaines's use of the imagery of falling with Marcus is different from the situations previously discussed. Marcus does rise like the others, yet his rise is not to redeem himself. Marcus's role is to become a catalyst for others in regard to religiosity. In his crucial moment of rising, Marcus resorts to the self-centered, self-sufficing demeanor that controls his behavior throughout the novel: "I promised myself I was go'n look out only for myself; and I wasn't go'n expect no more from life than what I could do for myself" (253). As with Munford Bazille, Gaines again incorporates the notion that even the lowliest sinner can serve as a redemptive force for others. Therefore, Gaines concludes Marcus's declaration of self-deification with the insertion of an ongoing church service, forcing James, Marcus's coworker, to lament, "I looked at Marcus and I felt empty inside. I felt empty because he could not believe in God or friendship; I felt empty

because I doubted if I believed in anything either” (253). At this point, James wrestles with his religious calling. Through Marcus, he will eventually restore his lost connection to the church. To highlight Marcus’s role as redeemer, Gaines includes several juxtapositions of secular and sacred occurrences in the novel. Frequently, Marcus’s mere presence inspires religious musings.

Gaines skillfully casts Marcus as the antithesis of Christian behavior, setting up a binary of appropriate and inappropriate conduct. Each of Marcus’s sins either compels another character to consider church, or the church itself is in the background of the scene. In this sense, Gaines endows Marcus, his new apostle, with redemptive powers. The recurrence of the juxtapositions in the novel prevents the focus on the plantation’s race relations from overshadowing the religious component. Thus, Gaines’s promotion of Christianity through Marcus appears an intentional act. Marcus, however, is not the embodiment of evil. After serving in the role of redeemer, Marcus becomes a sacrifice of the cause and is heralded for the positives he inspires. Like a Christian martyr, Marcus has redemptive power even after he dies.

Marcus’s punishment for murdering a rival is to labor on a plantation until he works off his bond. Determined, though, to enact revenge against Bonbon, the overseer, Marcus decides that he will seduce Bonbon’s black mistress, Pauline, and later Bonbon’s wife, Louise. Marcus’s sinful seduction will result not only in his death, his ultimate fall, but also in the fall of the plantation’s unchallenged race-driven dynamic. The ultimate failure of Marcus’s plan for revenge alludes to the Christian concept, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Rom 12-19). Marcus’ role as wrongful precipitator of

revenge emerges against a church backdrop. His initial attempts to seduce Pauline are subtle and without verbal communication: “They’d been sitting on the gallery half an hour and nobody had said a thing” (70). His silence, however, is juxtaposed with spiritual noise: “Things were so quiet on the gallery, Aunt Ca’line could hear all the singing and praying in the church” (70). The church activities act as a temporary deterrent from Marcus’s plan to indulge in two anti-Christian acts (revenge and fornication) and as a spiritual prompt for his congregation of gallery onlookers. The prevailing immorality prompts the woman to “seriously” consider attending church on Sunday and taking her husband with her. Gaines sets up an identical scenario during Marcus’ second visit: “Then it was quiet for a while. Farther up the quarter the people were singing in the church” (76), which all the porch sitters notice. Once again, church serves as a distraction from sin and emerges as an outlet by which to escape contact with sin.

Gaines’s most interesting juxtaposition involves Marshall Hebert, the plantation owner, and God. Hebert battles God for Marcus’s spirit. At one point, Bonbon advises James, “old man want you to go” (133), meaning that Hebert wants Marcus to complete a job while James goes into town. James transforms the meaning based upon Marcus’s intent at the plantation:

“The Old Man [God] wants me to go. He want him [Marcus] in there. He wants Bonbon to find him and her in that bed. Sure, He want that. He want a fire. He want Bonbon to burn the place down. Didn’t the Bible say He was going to destroy the world next time by fire? Sure, He want me to go.” (133)

James equates the destruction of plantation life to the destruction of the world. In the Old Testament, God destroys the original sinful world through flood, vowing to use fire to

destroy the Earth a second time (2 Pet 3: 12). James's conflation of the two "old men" is reminiscent of the plantation mindset during slavery, with the plantation owner conflated with God. Marcus's efforts, if successful, would establish a new order based on racial reconciliation. Herein lies a reversal, another example of Gaines's paradoxical handling of religious content. Marcus's goal will result in positive change, but he will incorporate it through sin, engaging Louise in an adulterous act. Here, Gaines borrows from the life of David, one of the most prominent figures in the Bible, whose life was a complex admixture of good and evil. David is considered the greatest king of Israel and had numerous military victories, but he also precipitated Uriah's death because he desired the man's wife.⁵² In the metaphorical role of God as Marcus's creator, Gaines sets up the identical dynamic for Marcus. Gaines uses the negatives of Marcus's existence for the higher purpose of ennobling his other characters.

At one point, even Marcus seems to be seeking recourse from his own actions. He continues to spend time with Louise, but when Bonbon is at home, Marcus would "go up to the church and look through the window" (232). Gaines drops the detail as subtly as he enters it. There is no previous commentary to suggest that Marcus is considering a return to the church or is concerned about what is going on in the church. His act suggests he is an outsider yearning for admission. Several diversions exist on or near the plantation for a sexually and physically active man such as Marcus, yet the compulsion to engage in church activities is a driving force.

⁵² 2 Samuel Chapters 11 and 12 chronicle David's adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and his arrangement of the death of Uriah, her husband. God chastises David and takes the life of David and Bathsheba's child as punishment.

Gaines continues to layer the temporal and nonsecular. James frequently reminisces on his failed relationship with Billie Jean, who abandoned him for a more exciting clime and broke his heart in the process. In one of his painfully pensive moments, he switches his focus to a prayer meeting occurring at the church. James's consideration of the five candidates for baptism seems haphazard or even inappropriate for the moment unless one considers the resultant "new life" of the baptized. James's need for a fulfilling intimacy is slowly sapping his spirit. As a result, he relies upon uncaring prostitutes to satiate his desire for female companionship. James needs the rebirth of baptism to fill an obvious void. Like Marcus, he cannot totally divest himself of a yen toward religion: "Still, I make the Sign of the Cross every night to stay in practice. Who knows? Maybe I'll go back to the full thing again some day" (19). Later, reflecting on his good deeds, James adds, "I had done everything a good Christian (one who had once believed) could do" (37). The necessity of the statement is questionable unless considered in terms of the impact of religion on believers. The added commentary "one who had once believed" is negated and diminished by his compliance to Christian-dictated behavior. Gaines has proven that even when removed from Christianity (if possible for his characters) it does not amount to a loss of faith.

Marcus's impact on those around him, especially James, contradicts Vinson's notion that there is "no extension of his [Marcus's] death to anything noble or positive for the community" (37). Contrarily, Marcus's new-age ministry repeatedly inspires a focus on Christianity in those with whom he interacts. One such person whose concept of Christianity changes profoundly is the butler, Bishop. Bishop's driving concern after

Marcus begins his affair with Louise is that the repercussions will ruin life for all blacks on the plantation:

Bishop looked so weak and scared walking there beside Aunt Margaret. Aunt Margaret was probably scared as he was, but she had extra strength to keep her going—extra strength she got from believing in God. Bishop went to church every Sunday, but he didn't look to God for his strength. He looked to that big house up the quarter. (222)

Bishop's penchant for relegating true power to man, especially white men, emerges as a disempowering folly. True vision for Bishop does not occur until he becomes aware of Hebert's plan to assist Marcus in killing Bonbon. Now, Bishop's prayers are renewed. Bishop implores blacks who had died to "forgive him for letting them down" (237). He realizes the way of the plantation and those who maintain it offer no future or security. Instead, the instability of the change in race relations precipitated by Marcus necessitates prayer for plantation dwellers' protection. Marcus's actions compel Bishop to return to the Christian faith of his ancestors, which encompasses a community collective.

Likewise, proof of Marcus's impact on James's religiosity emerges upon Marcus's death. Earlier, James's positive comments regarding Christianity seemed unconscious lapses to an earlier mindset; however, at the novel's close, they are intentional and devoutly profound. As Marcus and Louise prepare to leave the plantation together, James rushes to relay his admiration of their action: "You are both very brave and I worship you" (270). James appoints Marcus as a religious leader who takes a stand against evil. Marcus is no deity, and though James is visibly moved by Marcus's unnerving feats, James does not see Marcus as such. However, Marcus, as an apostle of

the truth, has opened James's eyes, creating an awareness of the flawed, evil existence of the plantation. Thus, the "worship" transcends Marcus (the emissary) to God. James can no longer subsist on the plantation, nor can he carry any remnant of it with him into his new life as evidenced by his refusal to accept the letter of reference from Hebert. Finally, in the novel's concluding lines, James shares with Margaret that he will not forget. He alludes to another biblical principle: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8: 32). Gaines does not have to explicitly present his characters as Christians or engage them in religious or church activities to demonstrate the inner workings of Christianity in their lives. Placing religious circumstance in the background of their day-to-day activities is just as effective in maintaining a focus on religiosity. As is the case with most of Gaines's characters, even those who profess lost faith or claim to be atheists are eventually, like James, renewed and guided by Christian faith.

All of Gaines's new-age apostles are not actually characters in his fiction. The professional athlete, another unconventional evangelist, emerges as a champion of the masses because of racism in society. Since sports are a microcosm of society, they are plagued by the same race-related issues as society, such as segregation and discrimination. As a result, in the 1960s, black athletes participated in numerous boycotts and strikes to protest racist practices in the world of sports.⁵³ Sociologist Harry Edwards documents the athletes' rise in prestige and respect in the black community once they

⁵³ In *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete* (2004), Douglas Hartman discusses athletes' protest movements such as the boycott of the New York Athletics Club's indoor track meet, the call for South Africa's expulsion from the Olympics because of its apartheid practices, and efforts to boycott the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Hartman focuses on sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who accepted their medals during the event with raised gloved fists and bowed heads as a sign of black pride, as key catalysts for change in sports.

began to speak out and rebel publically against social and political issues involving racism, discrimination, and whites' claims of superiority directed toward athletes and nonathletes alike. Edwards adds that in the newly established role as visible manifestation of black pride and competence, "the black athlete often feels increased pressures to conquer 'whitey' in the sports arena" (159-161). The white athlete symbolized white oppressors, so athletic victory for blacks translated to social victory.

On several occasions, Gaines focuses on the athlete's impact on average blacks. In another form of rhetorical manipulation, Gaines grants the athletes an authoritative voice, but the black fans provide the commentary. The athletes, as forces of uplift, become texts from which blacks extract meaning. In this sense, they are symbolic bibles, open to interpretation based on the needs of the reader/ fan. The link to Christianity occurs as Gaines's characters acknowledge God as the guarantor of the athletes' abilities and establish the athletes as God's emissaries sent to represent and empower blacks through periods of hardship and societal discord. Two sports heroes appear in *A Gathering of Old Men*. Salt and Pepper are the stars of the Louisiana State University football team. Salt is Gil Boutan, the son of the Cajun racist, Fix Boutan. Pepper is Calvin Harrison, an African-American halfback. Their symbiotic relationship leads the team to numerous victories; thus the two athletes embody another version of racial reconciliation. When Gil refuses to accompany his father on a retaliatory assault against blacks, Fix refers to his son as "a regular Christ" (145). The sheriff makes similar mocking comments: "'Y'all wasn't satisfied Salt played at LSU on one side of town, and Pepper played for Southern on the other side of town—no, y'all wanted them to play together.

Y'all prayed and prayed and prayed for them to play together'" (171). Though Fix and Sheriff Mapes cannot embrace integration, they recognize imminent changes in future race relations embodied by Boutan and Harrison.

With the black athlete as apostle, the new pulpit is the batter's mound or the boxing ring. The sermon is the display of athletic skill. The homerun or the knockout is the evidence of emergent prosperity. Gaines's characters draw strength from those to whom they can relate—superior beings who look like them. By doing so, however, Gaines is not suggesting that the characters are indulging in idolatry or rejecting the Christian representation of God. Contrarily, Gaines's characters attribute their heroes' skills and strength to God, thereby maintaining and reinforcing the characters' reverence to Him. Religion professor Vincent Wimbush notes that the Bible is basically a world of "heroes and heroines, of heroic peoples and their pathos and victory, sorrow and joy, sojourn and fulfillment" (7). Thus, with his characters' god-like veneration of sports heroes, Gaines links biblical heroes to earthly ones who evoke the same strength and inspiration.

Jane Pittman best explains the need for black heroes and God's role in fulfilling the need: "'Jackie and the Dodgers was for the colored people; the Yankees was for the white folks. Like in the Depression, Joe Louis was for the colored. When times get really hard, really tough, He always send you somebody'" (215). Jane views the athletes' talent as divinely granted, not for the athletes but for the masses. The sports heroes, as God's agents, serve as a collective voice for blacks. Additionally, Gaines's characters reinforce the notion that God uses the athletes as a form of Christian chastisement. Though He

gives the men to the people, they must remember to avoid idolatry and tap into their own inherent strength. Jane explains that Schmeling defeats Joe Louis in their initial bout because God is teaching a lesson: ““To show us Joe was just a man, not a superman. And to show us we could take just a little bit more hardship than we thought we could take at first”” (216). Likewise, Jane declares God uses black athletes to teach or punish whites for ““thinking they was something super”” (216).⁵⁴ Characters in the novel cannot accurately measure Pittman’s dedication to religion based on her propensity to miss church to enjoy athletic events because they overlook the need for personal uplift as a means for spiritual uplift. Church officials eventually remove Jane from her position as church mother because of her love for baseball. Jane provides clarification of her actions by reinforcing the point that Christian worship occurs by diverse means: ““I don’t need the mother [church position] to serve my Master . . . I don’t need to sit where Em-ma sitting to get on my bending knees”” (238). Jane’s attitude explains why she accepts Jimmy’s decision not to be deemed a preacher or deacon despite his designation as ““The One.”” People serve God in varied ways. Jane’s words, though, are not merely justification for her actions. Jane attributes Jackie Robinson’s skills to God, which, in turn, strengthen her reverence to God.

Phillip Martin, like Jane Pittman, looks to sports heroes as the physical manifestations of the ideal. In his moment of defeat, Martin compares himself to Floyd Patterson:

⁵⁴ Several black fiction writers celebrate Joe Louis’ defeat of white boxers: Richard Wright, *Lawd Today* (1963); Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945); and Louise Meriwether, *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1967).

“Floyd Patterson was tired,” Phillip said. “Did you see that fight? How many times that Swede knocked him down? Six, seven times? But he got up. He kept on getting up. I fell once—and I let a little finger—I coulda knocked that hand away like, like knocking lint off my robe.” (57)

As a preacher, Martin is fully aware of examples of biblical falls, so he could have easily used one of those. However, his self perception of himself as less than a real man, a real man such as Patterson, further propels him on his spiritual quest for redemption. Once Martin restores his sense of manhood, Beverly, a church member, acknowledges the parallel as evidence of a spiritual gift: “‘Your hands are so big,’ she said. ‘So strong. The hands of a fighter. These hands belong to a fighter’” (212). Beverly confirms the notion of the athlete as metaphoric defender or champion of the people. Sports represent one element in society where racism may never be eliminated but at least where black status can be promoted. Additionally, applying the fighter imagery to a preacher heightens the emphasis on the black preacher’s role in protesting inequality.

Gaines inserts the divinely inspired athlete again in *A Lesson Before Dying*. In this novel, Gaines expands on the concept. Instead of focusing on individual assessment as he does with Reverend Martin, Gaines demonstrates the athlete’s impact on an entire black community. A loss in the boxing ring is likened to the loss of a loved one. The discussion of the bout between Schmeling and Joe Louis is shrouded in seriousness: “To be caught laughing for any reason seemed like a sin. This was a period of mourning. What else in the world was there to be proud of, if Joe had lost? Even the preacher got into it. ‘Let us wait. Let us wait, children. David will meet Goliath again’” (88). The David and Goliath analogy illustrates the faith the characters have in their athletic heroes as the embodiment

of good that will overcome evil. During the rematch, the people pray fervently for the “only hero [they] knew” (88). The prevailing question attests to the power of the black athlete as divinely inspired: “Could God let it happen again? Would He let it happen again?” (88). Believers grant the athletes no free will; they are designed and guided to serve only as God’s instruments of empowerment. After the bout, the people hold their heads higher than ever before. The extent of the hero worship emerges when a doomed prisoner being escorted to his execution screams, “Please, Joe Louis, help me” (91). Louis is, of course, not the man’s god, but Louis is God’s earthly apostle, a tangible representative for the faithful.

Paradoxically, Gaines selects men who are on the brink of spiritual bankruptcy, who do not even view themselves as worthy of existence, or whose primary attribute is athletic ability to serve as emissaries of a Christian message. Again, the rationale exists in scripture. The Bible contains several examples of ordinary or fallen people, all unlikely candidates, whom God commissions to act as messengers of His presence and power. For instance, Amos challenges his call to prophesy: “I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet’s son; but I was a herdsman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit; . . . And the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel” (Amos 7:14). Also, Rahab, a prostitute, hides Joshua’s spies and helps them escape the king. Samson consorts with a prostitute, but God allows him to destroy the Philistines. Yet another example is David, God’s greatest soldier, who was an adulterer and murderer. And in the New Testament, Paul, prior to his conversion, persecutes Christians but becomes one of Jesus’s primary apostles. Gaines is merely following a proven formula. Though many of his new-age

apostles exhibit behavior contrary to biblical standards, they still possess the charisma, physical endowment, or rhetorical flair that allows them to serve in the role of contemporary preacher.

CHAPTER VII
FEMALE CHRISTIAN WARRIORS

“Prayer is and remains always a native and deep-seated impulse of the soul of man.”
Thomas Carlyle⁵⁵

“And the mother of the child said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.”
2 Kings 4: 30⁵⁶

Because a majority of Gaines’s fiction focuses on issues of male identity, quite often the strong and religiously oriented female characters (with the exception of Jane Pittman) are overlooked in criticism. *Catherine Carmier* could be more aptly named “Jackson Bradley,” for Catherine is merely the pawn in the men’s power play for female domination. When Gaines’s primary characters claim to reject religion, they exhibit a propensity to downplay the value of these female Christian warriors. Scholars such as Jackson Bradley, Grant Wiggins, and Jimmy Aaron and rebellious characters such as Marcus Payne experience frustration as a general reaction to their aunts’ pleas that they embrace Christianity. During crisis moments, the men vehemently oppose the women’s attempts to pray or offer spiritual consolation. In such scenarios, Gaines’s narrators often suggest that reliance on Christian principles is futile. However, consideration of the makeup of the female characters in terms of their Christian trappings establishes them, too, as contributors in the men’s movement toward identity and manhood even though the

⁵⁵ “Letter to George Duncan,” *New Letters of Thomas Carlyle Vol. II*, p. 266-67.

⁵⁶ *King James Bible*

men are not always aware of such. Heglar and Refoe note that women who raise Gaines's protagonists are not the men's biological mothers, focusing more attention on the women's roles as nurturers. Emphasis on the nurturing bond likens the women to the archetype of the black "Granny," a second mother to the community who keeps the black family together (58). As a whole, these women lean toward religion in times of strife. Notable literary counterparts are Gloria Naylor's Mama Day of the same-titled book, Mattie of *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Maya Angelou's nonfictional Momma Annie Henderson of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Gaines's inclusion of the religious females supports the argument that he is not opposed to Christianity. Gaines's Christian warriors frequently voice the Christian tenets that Gaines's male eventually embrace or at least acknowledge as valuable in their struggles with oppressive race relations and quests to achieve manhood. In a 2004 interview with Anne Brown, Gaines discusses Augusteen Jefferson, the crippled aunt who raised him. Gaines states that though she could not attend church, she was very religious. She sang gospel songs and frequently received visits from the minister and church deacons. Gaines adds that he uses his aunt's religious fortitude and strength as models for the women in his novels (29). Thus, emerging subtly from the background, Gaines's female characters use Christianity as their voices, weapons, and collective strength when interacting with the dominant males. The women's actions enforce the notion that they have agency inspired by their Christian faith despite their status as secondary characters to their surrogate sons.

One such dynamic female is Julie Rand of *Of Love and Dust*, who adopts Marcus after his mother dies, and his father deserts him. Upon entering Rand's room, James, Marcus's coworker on the plantation, is struck by the numerous pictures of Jesus: "No matter what wall you faced, you saw pictures of Jesus Christ" (10). Rand displays Jesus calendars from the late thirties to 1948, indicative of a close connection to Christianity. Her case, though, is not one of eccentricity; Rand clings only to objects of a personal nature. Her introductory words to James reinforce the importance of her personal connection to religion, for she identifies herself as a Christian: "'I'm Miss Julie Rand,' she said. 'I christened Marcus'" (8). Rand is aware of her imminent death. She has "'made peace with [her] Maker'" (12), and her next goal is to ensure that Marcus remains on the spiritual path she has created for him. She chooses James as Marcus' new protector in what appears initially to be a role as protector from Hebert and Bonbon, the plantation's owner and overseer. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, James and Marcus connect on a spiritual playing field, one whose foundation Rand lay in Marcus's childhood.

When Rand visits Marcus on the Hebert plantation, she reminds James of his assignment: "'The Lord will pay you back even if I can't'" (114). In reminding James of the biblical promise of reward for good deeds, she touches him on an emotional level. He considers how he always becomes "shame-face" when he is told what God will do for him. James refers to being ashamed only when he is discussing religion and his relationship with his wife. When James's wife leaves him for another man, James acknowledges his role as a contributor to her unhappiness. Likewise, he must consider his

role in his own spiritual failings. Rand serves as a subtle yet effective reminder. In this sense, Rand possesses the same redemptive powers as Marcus, though on a smaller scale. Gaines even provides her an iconic prop; she constantly waves a fan with a picture of Jesus on it as a tangible reminder of faith.

Rand asserts her agency through a discourse of intervention. In addition to her gendered language focused on the topic of nurture, Gaines's description works to downplay her import: "She was a very small old lady, and now, sitting there with her feet hardly touching the floor, she looked even smaller" (10). Still, Rand exudes presence. Her conversation with James makes him uncomfortably aware of sin: "But her eyes were still quick, sharp, piercing, and knowing. And she knew I had lied about Marcus" (112). Gaines grants Rand godlike powers. She looks down on James, she displays omniscient ability, and she demands obedience: "She knew I would do what she wanted me to do" (112). Throughout their interaction, Rand reinforces the religious stirrings, waving her fan and repeating "Ehh, Lord." She has proven herself a Christian warrior, reserved yet powerful whether she is vocal or taciturn. Rand is only present for a brief period in the novel, but her essence lingers with James and Marcus whom she impacts on an emotional battlefield. Marcus's periodic visits to peek in the church window are probably inspired by his aunt's Christian teachings. As the voice of religious consciousness for Marcus, she is indirectly responsible for James's religious renewal at the novel's close.

After being arrested, Marcus leaves Rand's home to labor on the plantation. As if to ensure that Marcus maintain a connection to religiosity, Aunt Margaret, the housekeeper, steps in as a second to Rand. Gaines does not introduce Margaret until well

into Part Two of the novel, leaving James as the sole combatant against Marcus's plan for revenge. Failing in his efforts, James requests Margaret's assistance in preventing the affair. Margaret's religion, like Julie Rand's, has a direct impact on her character. She accepts her role as God's vehicle to aid in precipitating change. Linking Marcus's imminent disruption of plantation life to the end of existence, Margaret proclaims, "[N]ow I'm old, they [her hands] got to protect the world'" (139). The primary difference between James and Margaret is that she accepts her role, and he struggles against his:

And I thought to myself it was the Old Man. He created them. He didn't create the situation because He knew all the time they would do that themselves. He created them and created me and said, "All right, that'll be your hell. Look after them.

"Why me?" I probably said. "Why me? I like doing just what they like doing. Why do I have to give it up and ---." (146)

Unwilling to conform, James concludes that God simply remains uninvolved or perhaps does not care whereas Margaret prepares to battle Marcus. Margaret is not opposed to change on the plantation, but to the way in which Marcus plans to enact it. Despite her interference, Marcus and Louise manage to engage in sexual relations, blocking the door with furniture to prevent Margaret's entrance. As the affair progresses, Margaret realizes her implication in the matter; she could be punished for not divulging the details.

Nevertheless, she is emboldened by her religious faith. Margaret is no longer afraid of Bonbon possibly learning of her knowledge of the affair. Likewise, she assumes a non-servant stance when speaking to Louise. Invoking God, "My Master, my Master," Margaret, without impunity, chastises Marcus and Louise, accusing them of insanity and shamelessness.

Margaret and Bishop, Hebert's butler, are both invested in Marcus and Louise's affair because of their long residencies on the plantation. Bishop becomes increasingly concerned when he learns the plantation owner is a conspirator in Marcus' plan to escape with Louise. Margaret's Christianity-driven demeanor impacts James significantly as he juxtaposes her character with Bishop's:

I stood at the end of the gallery watching them. Bishop looked so weak and scared walking there beside Aunt Margaret. Aunt Margaret was probably scared as he was, but she had extra strength to keep her going—extra strength she got from believing in God. Bishop went to church every Sunday, but he didn't look to God for his strength. He looked to that big house up the quarter. And right now that big house wasn't setting on very solid ground. (222)

Gaines uses Margaret and Bishop to impart a biblical principle. The wise man builds his house upon a rock, and the elements cannot damage it. The foolish man builds upon sand, and the rain, floods, and wind destroy his home. The house is symbolic of one's life, and the rock and sand symbolize faith or the lack thereof.⁵⁷ Margaret possesses a deeply rooted, long-lived connection to religion that will sustain her through pending turmoil on the plantation. Bishop is the foolish man, whose overwhelming weakness, resultant of a lack of faith, foreshadows his imminent downward spiral. Contrarily, James's character represents the opportunity to change. He wavers in his faith but has not completely denied his connection to his spiritual past. Margaret's presence is an authoritative reminder to James that believers can weather the storms of adversity.

Like Margaret, Emma of *A Lesson Before Dying* fits the pattern of what Harris denotes as "long-suffering historical black women who take their burdens to the Lord"

⁵⁷ Matthew 7: 24-27.

(132).⁵⁸ When the defense attorney demeans the condemned Jefferson by relegating him to “hog,” Emma, Jefferson’s godmother, makes it her foremost goal to ensure that Jefferson dies with dignity. As discussed earlier, Emma assigns the task of reinstating Jefferson’s sense of manhood to Reverend Ambrose and Grant, the school teacher. Because Grant’s manhood is also challenged and redefined as the story unfolds, manhood serves as the primary topic of criticism of the novel. However, it should be noted that Emma’s definition of “die with dignity” extends beyond a desire that Jefferson realizes he is a man. The desire for Jefferson’s manhood is tantamount to her desire that Jefferson accepts Christianity before he dies. Emma voices her desire on numerous occasions: “‘It’s in your hands,’ she said. ‘You [Grant] and Reverend Mose. I just hope—I just hope—I just hope y’all work together’” (164). The passionate repetition attests to the strength of her conviction and the need to restore the two concepts that will make Jefferson whole. Emma’s assertion of agency lies in initiating Jefferson’s transformation. Though the job is delegated to Grant and Ambrose, Emma grants them the power and maintains a level of involvement. In this sense, she indirectly controls the action.

Emma’s first task is to acquire permission for Jefferson to receive visitors. She appeals to Henri Pichot, the plantation owner, who will make the appeal to the sheriff. After being summarily dismissed, Emma warns Pichot, “‘I’ll be up here again tomorrow, Mr. Henri. I’ll be on my knees next time you see me, Mr. Henri’” (23). Here, Gaines injects dual rhetoric. Emma’s remark implies two alternatives; she will either beg or pray.

⁵⁸ Harris notes similarities between Grant’s Aunt Tante Lou and Mama Lena Younger and between Grant and Beneatha Younger of *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. Both young adults rebel against the elders’ adherence to orthodox religion (127).

Pichot's race-generated stance of superiority and Emma's low social standing lead the reader to acknowledge the first option without consideration of the latter. However, Emma's tone during the conversation suggests she does not plan to assume a beggar's stance. To beg at this point would be indicative of a fall. Emma has already experienced her fall when Jefferson is sentenced. The imagery now is her rise from the fall, for she is taking command of the situation. Kneeling in prayer is an intentional act controlled only by Emma. Thus, Emma's voice becomes authoritative as she continues: "Tell him what I done for this family, Mr. Henri" (23). When Pichot becomes visibly impatient and attempts to end the conversation, Emma presses him for specifics: "When?" (23). As indicated by his body language and response, Pichot is unused to such defiance. When he attempts to walk away, Emma again engages in a verbal power play, expressing her intent to return. Though she states that she will be on her knees, Emma has demonstrated that she does not consider herself an inferior. Conclusively, it is a prayerful posture to which Emma refers. She is boldly asserting her Christianity-based fortitude, a source of strength that Pichot may dismiss but cannot defeat.

After visits to see Jefferson, Emma feels overwhelmed by Jefferson's harsh treatment of her. She laments her plight: "Oh, Lord Jesus, stand by, stand by" and later "What I done done,' she cried, 'to make my Master hate me so?" (123). Trudier Harris points out that "the implication is that, though she may be crying now, there will be joy in the morning" (132). Emma's grief recalls Job's declaration of longsuffering: "Thou renewest they witnesses against me, and increaseth thine indignation upon me; changes and war *are* against me" (Job 11: 17). Biblical scholars do not view the discourse as

evidence of waning faith but as a typical act of human nature, the expostulations of a sufferer.⁵⁹ Job endures to the end, and so does Emma.

Ultimately, Emma's example, along with the influence of Grant and Ambrose, persuades Jefferson to pray. Grant reminds him: "'Hasn't she done many things to please you Jefferson? Cooked for you, washed for you, taken care of you when you were sick? She is sick now, Jefferson, and she is asking for only one thing in this world. Walk like a man. Meet her up there'" (222). In a detailed argument regarding Jefferson's Christ-like significance, Auger casts Emma in the role of God, granting her the "creative potential associated with God" (*Native Sons* 65) in Jefferson's renewal of identity.⁶⁰ Emma's spiritual strength more than compensates for any physical weakness resultant of aging or her low societal ranking as cook and maid.

Aunt Charlotte of *Catherine Carmier*, yet another of Gaines's empowered religious characters, shares Emma's ability to successfully engage in a linguistic battle of words when she needs to assert her agency. She also shares behaviors with Julie Rand and Tante Lou, Grant's aunt. Like Rand, Charlotte decorates her home with calendars depicting the likeness of Jesus. Charlotte imagines a positive response to the depiction of Christ praying in the garden: ". . . there was something about looking at the Master on his knees that did something to the soul. She had thought that the picture would be encouraging to Jackson as he started out each day for his teaching" (101-02). Jackson's response to the picture is disgust, for he cannot, like his aunt, find commune with God

⁵⁹ See *Job and the Mystery of Suffering: Spiritual Reflections* (1998) by Richard Rohr.

⁶⁰ Auger suggests that if Jefferson is a Christ figure, then Emma assumes the role usually reserved for God. He analyzes the situation as Gaines's discursive shift from whiteness and patriarchy (81).

upon viewing the iconic representation. Similar to the conflict with Grant and Tante Lou, Charlotte sends Jackson to college to become a teacher, only to have him return with the declaration that his studies have turned him away from the church. Both women rebel against the announcements, but Charlotte's response moves beyond words of disappointment. She slaps Jackson across the mouth: "She had not intended to hit him. The hand had jerked forward to shut him up" (100). Charlotte's response is akin to Mama Lena Younger's response to Beneatha's proclamation that she does not believe in God in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The matriarchs are hurt and offended by the rejection of the Christian teachings that they have instilled in the young adults as they raised them to adulthood. A rejection of Christianity is thereby likened to a rejection of the mother figures by association. Charlotte is not a violent woman who guides by intimidation, so the uncharacteristic display of emotion serves as evidence of her anguish.

Based on Jackson's resistance to Charlotte's appeals for restoration of faith, it appears that she has no impact on him; however, a heated exchange between the two exposes the folly of such an assessment. Initially, Jackson presents the commonly used argument that he had to choose between his studies and church. Evidencing her agency, Charlotte proves that she can navigate dialectic space as well as rely upon emotions as a defense against Jackson's formal education. When Charlotte counters with rational discourse-- "Plenty people done done both" (99)-- Jackson changes his argument, but presents another equally weak rebuttal. He blames his aunt for sending him to school when he did not desire to go. Jackson appears childlike in his effort to stand up to his aunt. Like an obedient youth, he stands motionless as Charlotte engages in prayer for the

return of his receptivity to Christianity. Jackson finally concedes that he has not forgotten God. His complaint is with the church itself, for he considers it a “bourgeois farce” (100). Like Grant, Jackson maintains some form of religious faith. Importantly, Charlotte has the final word, a sign of her victory, and leaves Jackson to contemplate his “dry, dead” life (102). Though he cannot accept all the components of Christian worship which Charlotte embraces, she makes him realize that he has not rejected the training she instilled in his youth.

Despite his denunciation of faith, Jackson remains aware of its importance in a future life with Catherine: “With her you must believe—you must believe in something” (222). Jackson’s dilemma is his inability to extract from religion a personal peace that reconciles the uncertainties of his daily existence. He is yet to realize the power of religion that Charlotte does in dealing with adversity: “I can stand. I got a pillar so strong to lean on nothing can drag me down” (162). Jackson’s attempt to deny faith, as with Grant, is not an option in the establishment of a grounded and sustainable sense of self. Though Charlotte’s efforts regarding Jackson are only partially realized at the novel’s close, her message is not to be dismissed, for she possesses the remedy that Jackson needs to refocus his life. He does not fully realize the importance of religion until he loses his beloved Catherine who also clings to faith as her primary source of strength.

Firm in their convictions, Gaines’s Christian warriors emerge as forces to be reckoned with, even in their roles as secondary characters. I disagree with Heglar and Refoe’s assertion that the women’s “ethical ideas centered in Christianity seem dated, if not irrelevant” (59). The females’ insistence on enforcing the values of Christianity

contributes to the men's quest for manhood even after Gaines relegates them to the background. Gaines's primary theme is manhood, so each of the women is treated in the stereotypical manner perpetuated by black Southern patriarchy. Gaines primarily assigns them the gendered duties of domestic chores, child rearing, and emotional support. Despite this classification as inferior other, their religion provides agency. Therefore, the women challenge the dictates of patriarchy that would render them dependent, voiceless, and emotionally weaker, using their indomitable Christian fervor as the weapon of choice.

Even though Gaines keeps the focus on the male characters' development by downplaying the women's presence at the end of the novels, the women still assert their agency. Despite Emma's contribution, *A Lesson Before Dying* is Grant's narration of his and Jefferson's interaction, so Emma fades into the background and practically disappears in the closing chapters. However, her primary goal in Jefferson's development has been realized, so her work is done. Though Julie Rand raises Marcus from childhood, Rand is absent from Gaines's discussion of Marcus's funeral, an event at which she would certainly have been a highly visible presence. Nevertheless, Rand can take partial credit for the changes in plantation race dynamics that are initiated by Marcus and realized in James. Finally, Charlotte disappears in the final chapter of *Catherine Carmier*, and Gaines no longer mentions or alludes to her. Like the other women, though, Jackson is cognizant of Charlotte's teachings as he faces his future without Catherine, the result of his refusal to recognize the value of the Christian faith his aunt embraces. In essence, though Gaines removes the women from the scene, he has developed them well enough

for the women to exert a lasting influence. Christianity does not trap the women in societal representations of gendered behavior; instead, it allows them to transcend them. In the vein of the religious Aunt Fe of the short story “Just Like a Tree,” each woman embodies the message of the same-titled spiritual, “I shall not be moved.”

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

My intent with this study was twofold. First was to explore the ubiquitous and indomitable nature of religion in Ernest J. Gaines's fiction. The second and most important purpose was to offer an alternative reading of religious context. Too few critics address the impact of religion upon Gaines's characters. Those who broach the topic generally punctuate the negatives and make little to no effort to explore correlations between the characters' development of identity and judgment of others and their religious backgrounds. As a rule, critics accept Gaudet's summation that in Gaines's fiction, there is a general mistrust of religion, preachers, and Christians (81). If it is appropriate to address Gaines's mistrust of religion, then it is even more appropriate to consider the solutions the author offers. Gaines presents the existential question, "If not this, then what?" In his fiction, he creates scenarios that allow the reader to find answers. One conclusion is that Gaines's characters who voice a mistrust of Christianity or a loss of faith are not rejecting Christianity, but what black society often refers to as the "white man's God." It is difficult to embrace a god whom slave masters invoked for strength or justification as they brutalized slaves. It is actually surprising that slaves embraced a religion which whites used so hypocritically: "I hate y'all. Hate y'all with all my heart. Doing it [offering water to newly freed slaves] because I'm a God-fearing Christian" (*Jane Pittman* 43). It is equally difficult to embrace a god whom racist whites insisted

had granted them superiority that required them to segregate themselves from black society, practice discriminatory acts, and claim the victor's spoil of the very circumstances that they contrived. Thus, mistrust or denial of Christianity is an understandable outcome in the face of disempowering social issues.

The primary lesson gleaned from this study is that the solution for Gaines' characters and African Americans is engagement in the process of reworking the definition of true Christianity. They must make God their own. I do not agree with Auger's notion of the black community's need to produce a "new God" to confirm human dignity ("A Lesson About Manhood" 80). Slaves did not revere a god who condoned their brutal treatment, but more so one who would compensate them for enduring it. The first step in the appropriation of God is the formulation of an image to whom believers can relate. Several prominent Bible scholars and theologians argue the notion that Jesus, along with other significant characters from the Bible, is black.⁶¹ Gaines's characters Julie Rand and Aunt Charlotte, who revere images of the white Jesus, are not embracing the whiteness but the ideal the image represents. When Jane Pitman describes her travels, or spiritual conversion, she speaks of a white man with long yellow hair who offers to carry her load. Also present is a "jet black and shiny" man (143) who is the embodiment of the devil and attempts to deceive her by assuming the images of Jane's deceased husband and son. The color designations are societally ingrained; white represents pureness and innocence, and black is indicative of evil. However, Gaines

⁶¹ See James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (1997) and *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969); Alan Boesak, *Black and Reformed* (1984); Kenneth L. Waters, Sr., *Afrocentric Sermons* (1993); and Albert Cleage, *Black Messiah* (1968).

shows that skin color is no longer the means to ascertain good and evil, for Jane also refers to Albert Cluveau, who is not black, as the devil. Another example of the re-imagining of God occurs when Gaines's characters visualize God's reflection in black athletes endowed with superhuman abilities to serve as God's emissaries of uplift.

Next in the redefining process is a hermeneutical approach that serves all mankind, not just the dominant culture. The key to redefining or elucidating accepted dogma is accurate interpretation. Once God and Christianity are correctly assessed, Christianity emerges as a model for conduct, for its basic principle is "Love thy neighbor" and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The new outlook is not secularization, however, but a doctrine of positive morality. Gaines's characters, specifically the educated young males, often struggle with a disconnect from religion. It is important to note that Christianity often came under unfair scrutiny during the periods in which the novels are set. Thus, rebellion against the status quo (one significant concept being Christianity) made religion a primary candidate for the scourge of radical youth such as Gaines's scholars who were in search of identity in a harsh environment. Gaines's young adults, like their actual counterparts in society, must sincerely listen to the voice of the elders who have formulated an image of God and an understanding of "untainted" Christianity. It is not uncommon to hear the elderly in black society dispute a secular claim or act with the response, "Not the God I serve." They know the true definition of respect, love, and charity. Likewise, they realize that Christianity embraces the ethnicity, traditions, and culture of black Americans, as well as all people.

The result is a Black theology, a combination of “Christianity and blackness, Martin and Malcolm, Black Church and Black Power” (Cone, “Black Theology”182). Gaines does not explore the socio-religious concept in great detail in his fiction, but it is implicitly interwoven as the essence of his characters’ struggle with and eventual embrace of Christianity. Though some of the characters never acknowledge a reconnection to Christianity, some form of it still surfaces and impacts their lives.

Gaines does offer a return to the root of black religion, Africa. Maulana Karenga, professor of African studies, notes that a key theme in African religions is an intense respect for nature: “The whole world as God’s creation is alive with his/her symbols and gifts to humans, and bears witness to his/her power, beauty and beneficence” (273). Just as Gaines establishes a personal church at the oak tree, the river, and the cane field, he does so with his characters as further proof of a redefined religion. Jane Pittman explains that it is not madness to talk to trees and rivers. She sees God’s creations as extensions of Him, and their longevity grants them knowledge they will share with those who listen. Whites who try to control nature/religion must suffer the cost (155). Similarly, Gaines inserts a natural religion in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Jefferson develops a kinship with the oft-mentioned sycamore tree that he can see from his prison window. His final diary entry after his conversion is a list of natural elements. Grant’s renewed spirituality is also manifested in nature. He sits at the foot of a tree, alone there for the first time, and notices an unusual occurrence: a yellow butterfly alights on a mound of bull grass. Grant’s contemplation of the scene underscores God’s presence:

What had brought it there? There were other places where it could have rested—

there was the wire fence on either side of the road, there were weeds along both ditches with strong fragrances, there were flowers just a short distance away in Pichot's yard—so why did it light on a hill of bull grass that offered it nothing?
(252)

Grant finds peace, the same peace that Jefferson experiences, as both revel in the serenity of the natural.

With the inclusion of a religious component in his fiction, Gaines restores a lost or fractured connection to traditional black religion. His incorporation of circumstance specific to blacks counters the notion that Christianity is little more than the white man's religion with no value to blacks. Mitchell notes that the religion that African slaves had upon arrival in the Americas was rather compatible with Christianity (50-51). In his slave narrative, Equiano is astounded by the similarity after his exposure to the Bible: "I was wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my own country written almost exactly there" (83). Thus, it is the appropriation, interpretation, and implementation of Christianity that reveal its potency and indomitable nature. This study is best concluded in the words of Naomi Long Madgett, whose poem summarizes the spiritual leanings of black existence in America, a religious fervor that has never departed despite challenges to it.

A Litany for Afro-Americans

Our ancestors called Thee by other names,
But thou, O God, were with us
In the dawn of time.

LORD, BE WITH US STILL.

From Ife and Timbuktu we came,

Crying to Thee in the agonies
Of the Middle Passage.

WE CRY TO THEE TODAY.

In the confinement of our bodies' chains,
Our spirits nightly floated free.

FREE OUR SPIRITS NOW, WE PRAY.

We watched the captors steal our names,
Our continuity, the richness of our heritage,
And we were naked and impotent
Against the evil of their power.
Other captors rob us still.

TEACH US TO BE WATCHFUL, LORD.
TEACH US TO BE STRONG.

Against false prophets,
Against destructive forces
That seek to divide us
And deny us the family of Thy spirit,
The family of *our* spirit,

PROTECT US, O GOD,
AND LEAD US IN THE WAY
OF POWER THROUGH RIGHTEOUSNESS.
AMEN.

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