THE STRUGGLE FOR BLACK MANHOOD IN *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN*, *A GATHERING OF OLD MEN*, AND *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

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Introduction

The struggle for black manhood and male identity is a central theme in Ernest J. Gaines's novels *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), all of which are centered around African American characters in the region around the fictional town Bayonne, Louisiana. All three of the novels depict black men's struggle to be treated as humans. Commenting on African American men's status in an interview Gaines said:

> In this country the black man has been pushed into the position where he is not supposed to be a man. This is one of the things that the white man has tried to deny the black ever since he brought him here in chains….My heroes just try to be men; but because the white man has tried everything from the time of slavery to deny the black this chance, his attempts to be a man will lead towards danger.
>
> (O'Brien 30)

Despite this danger, the men in Gaines's novels all engage in a struggle for identity, manhood, and the right to be treated as the humans they are. This fight is sometimes fought physically in Gaines's novels, for instance in *A Gathering of Old Men*. However, a much more urgent fight is fought against the perception of white Americans (sometimes internalized by blacks) that African Americans are inferior to white Americans.

The ability of his African American characters to construct their own identity in Gaines's novels is systematically undermined by white oppression, not only during the period of slavery, but for many decades to follow. However, what Gaines's novels also show, and actually foreground, is how African American male characters struggle, at least to some extent successfully, to overcome white oppression and domination, to strive for individual as well as collective freedom. Focusing on the struggle for black male identity in Gaines's work

I will draw on studies on race and gender by critics such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Rabaka Reiland, Keith Clark, Carlyle van Thompson, and Suzanne W. Jones. By means of W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness, and black autonomy, I will argue that the possibilities for Gaines's African American male characters to develop a positive identity are consistently undermined by a variety of physical, psychological and ideological forces. However, at the same time, Gaines's novels show that through black resistance and black agency his male characters are able to overcome oppression and (re)claim manhood.

Chapter One

Being a Man: Masculinity and Humanity in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*

Even though the title of Ernest J. Gaines's novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) does not immediately suggest a focus on black manhood, the story of Miss Jane, which covers the period between 1850 and 1962, also includes the stories of several male African American characters, for instance, her partner Joe Pittman, her adopted son Ned, and a boy from her parish named Jimmy Aaron. Since *Jane Pittman* spans a period of more than a century, it reflects the changes in white attitudes towards African Americans during a large timespan. Since my focus in this thesis is on the construction of male identity I will only analyze the characters Joe Pittman, Ned Douglas, and Jimmy Aaron in this chapter. I will frame my analysis of Joe Pittman by means of W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, which I will also use to analyze Ned's speech on the subject of American citizenship. In my analysis of Jimmy the focus will be on time and change that time brings about in the novel. By means of these analyses I will argue that in *Jane Pittman* Gaines shows that the possibilities for African American men to develop a positive identity were long undermined by the psychological force of double consciousness. As a consequence of double consciousness black men internalized a notion of inferiority in their own minds; they came to believe the message of inferiority that racist American society forced upon them. The effects of this become clear, for instance, in the difficulties that members of the civil rights movement faced to mobilize their own people for demonstrations and other campaigns for equality. However, the stories of Ned and Jimmy also foreground the possibility of black agency and resistance; they show the change in the attitude of African Americans in regard to their own status and rights.

In 1873 Jane and Joe Pittman get together; even though they do not get married Miss Jane takes Joe's name and they decide to live together as husband and wife. At this point in the novel, Miss Jane is a field hand on a plantation; Joe is a horse breaker there. When Joe is offered a job as a horse breaker on a different plantation where he can make more money he tries to resign from his current employer, Colonel Dye. The Colonel asks him for a hundred and fifty dollars that he supposedly paid to free Joe from the Ku Klux Klan several years before. Rather than to show resistance to the Colonel's outrageous request to pay him this much money (Jane and Joe make less than a dollar a day with both of their salaries combined), Miss Jane says that "he couldn't leave and not pay Colonel Dye his money. He knowed he didn't owe Colonel Dye any money, but how could he prove it? The Freedom Beero once, but they wasn't there no more" (81, 82). Even though Joe Pittman has been a free man since the abolition of slavery in 1865, and not Colonel Dye's possession, he lets the Colonel treat him as such. There is no direct consequence if Joe does not pay anything. Whether Joe pays or not, the Colonel is resentful about Joe's decision to leave him; if this turns to anger he can send patrollers after Jane and Joe regardless. Even if the Colonel does not do so, there can still be patrollers on the road who are not sent by anyone. This means that paying Colonel Dye does not ensure Jane and Joe of anything. In fact, even after Joe has paid the Colonel and sets out for his new employer's plantation Jane describes how "we traveled the swamps all the time for fear the secret groups might see us and attack us for leaving Colonel Dye's place" (83). As such, Jane emphasizes the relation between Colonel Dye and Joe as one of owner and possession; just as in slavery times there are patrollers on the road to punish those that "run away", even though they are legally free.

In the past it would have been possible for the Freedmen Bureau to defend him and stand up for him, but it no longer exists. The consequence is that no one stands up for Joe; he does not even do so himself. Moreover, when Joe raises the money from his new employer

and gives it to Colonel Dye, his response is to ask for thirty more dollars in interest (82). Again, Joe does not defend himself or stand up again the Colonel; rather, he sells the few possessions that he and Jane have and pays the extra thirty dollars to the Colonel. Despite Joe's knowledge that the Colonel's demands are completely unreasonable, Joe does not even consider resisting him. Joe does not consider himself to be in a position from which he has the possibility to stand up for himself as a free man; he knows that the Colonel does not own him, but still he pays a large sum for his freedom. Jane and Joe never discuss why he does so; there is not as much as a doubt in their minds that Joe must pay, even though he only gets a vague notion of the Colonel as to why. Joe does not even consider to go against the Colonel's orders; he seems to have accepted the Colonel's notion that he is a piece of property and needs to buy his freedom, even though slavery was abolished some forty years earlier. Joe has internalized the notion of black inferiority that the Colonel has forced upon him.

This notion is what W.E.B. Dubois describes in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as "double consciousness":

> This sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.

Du Bois' theory describes the African American's perception of himself as white people see him: whether they feel contempt or pity for him, they regard him as inferior, and the African American has internalized this view of himself. Reiland Rabaka defines double consciousness as "the psychological condition and social state where blacks incessantly and uncritically engage and judge their life-worlds and life-struggles exclusively utilizing the white world's anti-black racist culture and conceptions of civilization" (9). According to Rabaka, double consciousness is a psychological condition as well as a social state. Moreover, he argues that

"the concept of 'double-consciousness' discursively captures the ways in which blacks, however subtly, unceasingly accept and internalize the diabolical dialectic of white superiority and black inferiority" (9). Even though he knows that he does not owe Colonel Dye any money at all, Joe goes out of his way to pay for his freedom because he has internalized the notion of black inferiority. Joe has adopted the Colonel's white perspective and endures his last humiliation by the man who essentially claims to own him.

More evidence for Joe's double consciousness can be found in the way in which he deals with other situations; Joe does not display any signs of an inferiority complex in his dealings with other black men or with Jane, for instance. After a few years on the new plantation Jane begins to worry about Joe's life. She starts to have nightmares and believes that Joe will be killed by a black horse he has to break. When Joe eventually brings a black horse back to the farm Jane decides to secretly visit a "hoo-doo," a conjuring woman from New Orleans who is supposedly able to summon supernatural forces, named Madame Gautier. The hoo-doo tells Jane that Joe will indeed die when he tries to break the horse because "that's man's way. To prove something. Day in, day out he must prove that he is a man. Poor fool" (93). According to Madame Gautier, a "man must always go somewhere to prove himself. He don't know everything is already inside him" (94). Indeed, Joe refuses to leave the horse alone when Jane asks him. He also refuses to let someone else break the horse because he is the chief horse breaker; moreover "who was go'n ride something he was scared to ride?" (90). Even the magic powder that Jane receives from the hoo-doo does not stop him. Gaines said about Joe's determination to break the black horse that "a man must do something, no matter what it is, he must do something and he must do that something well" (O'Brien 30). As Gaines explains, Joe's way is indeed to prove something; to have a goal, to achieve that goal, and to do so well. To be a man, and to follow "man's way" is to have a goal and to be willing to face danger and if necessary death to reach that goal. Joe does what he feels he

needs to do, and he does not display any feelings of inferiority. On the contrary: he is so convinced of his abilities that he overestimates himself and gets killed. Joe's sense of inferiority only manifests itself when he is dealing with white men.

Joe Pittman is not the only man in *Jane Pittman* who suffers from double consciousness. The novel also provides a noteworthy example of the implications and consequences of double consciousness for to the community in general, namely the murder of Ned Douglass. Ned, who is Jane's adopted son, was formerly known as Ned Brown (Jane's maiden name), but he changes his last name to Douglass (after Frederick Douglass, the prominent abolitionist). When Ned is an adult he leaves home to go North, where a white couple pays for his higher education. Eventually he comes back to Jane's parish as a schoolteacher. Besides being a teacher, Ned is also a civil rights activist. He is shot by a white man after delivering a speech to Jane's parish in 1899, in which he explains "the difference between a black American and a nigger":

> "A nigger feels below anybody else on earth. He's been beaten so much by the white man, he don't care for himself, for nobody else, and for nothing else. He talks a lot, but his words don't mean nothing. He'll never be American, and he'll never be a citizen of any other nation. But there's a big difference between a nigger and a black American. A black American cares, and will always struggle".
>
> (110)

Ned calls blacks who have internalized a sense of inferiority "niggers," while "black Americans" are black men who resist racism. Ned proposes in this speech that, by continuing to struggle, the next generation of African Americans will not feel that they are inferior to whites and therefore will not suffer from double consciousness. He insists they shake the inferior status of being a "nigger" and become black Americans. However, according to Daniel Thomières,

> When [Ned] tries to convince the members of the black community that they have rights and that they should fight for them, they are not interested and certainly not ready to follow him. Most of them are afraid or suspicious. It is obvious that questioning the hegemony of the whites is unthinkable for them. (223)

The people of the parish suffer from double consciousness. They do not question the status quo of the world they live in; rather, they question Ned's sanity for publicly claiming that they should regard themselves as equally American as and consequently should be treated equally to, white Americans. Ned, on the other hand, does not seem affected by double consciousness, but as a result of his taking a stand he is killed. Thus, the novel suggests, there are two options. Black people are expected to submit to the white hegemony and consequently suffer from double consciousness; this is the norm. When one does not consider himself inferior to whites, however, it is essential that he does not make this known to them, for the penalty is death.

Even though the community does not seems very impressed by Ned's speech on equality when he is alive, the community's grief causes a response to his death which indicates a change in attitude. According to William L. Andrews

> After Ned Douglass's instructions in black history and nation-building, Miss Jane and her compatriots build a monument to Ned's memory and finish the school he started. Thus they show that they have learned the necessity of conserving a useable past on which to build a viable future. To memorialize Ned's example is to begin the fundamentally progressive process of creating a black American heroic tradition. (147)

Ned's death causes the parish to honor him like a hero. Even though this gesture seems to imply the community's understanding of the importance of his work, they actually completely misunderstand his words. Since the community honors him like a hero, they miss the point that Ned was trying to make: that he was just a man, and any man present could follow his

lead and do the same thing. Thus, the community recognizes the importance of Ned's action, but simultaneously they show that they are not ready to accept Ned's message of equality as a general standard.

In his speech, Ned does not only discuss the difference between a black American and a "nigger," but also some implications of black manhood. Ned finishes his speech by saying, "'I'm telling you all this because I want my children to be men.'" Initially this seems to be a rather surprising comment to make for him since Ned has fathered two girls and no boys. He adds that, "'I want my children to fight. Fight for all –not just for a corner. The black man or white man who tell you to stay in a corner want to keep your mind in a corner too'" (110). Since Ned is a schoolteacher, he might simply refer to the boys that he teaches when he days he wants his children to be men. However, it is more likely that Ned uses "men" here as a gender-neutral term, meaning human or mankind because his speech is aimed at the entire parish; if Ned wanted to appeal to men only he could have just invited the men. Moreover, Ned's use of the words "black man" and "white man" in the last sentence is also used in a gender-neutral way. Ned's speech thus suggests that being a man has very little to do with masculinity; rather being a man means being a human being. The struggle that Ned advocates is then not merely a struggle for masculine status, it is a struggle to be treated as a human being.

Ned's life shows many similarities to that of another male character in Jane Pittman: Jimmy Aaron. Jimmy is a boy from Jane's parish. From an early age Jimmy writes letters for the people in the parish. According to Jane, "he would get it down just like you felt it inside. I used to sit there and look at him on my steps writing and water would come in my eyes" (202). Because of Jimmy's natural gift as a writer, and the brightness he displays from an early age the people of the parish have chosen him to be a kind of Messiah figure. Jane describes that "by the time he was twelve he was definitely the One" (206). Even though it is never

explicitly stated what the people in the parish expect from Jimmy, it is implied that he will eventually fulfill a role as a kind of savior figure; this is emphasized when Jane comments that "we knowed he was close to God" (212). Because of his closeness to God Jimmy is initially expected to become a preacher. However, when he grows up he decides that he wants to be neither a preacher, nor fulfill any other position in the church. Jimmy moves away to New Orleans, where he receives an education. In 1958 he comes back to the parish and calls on the people to help him; like Ned before him he needs them to attend a demonstration for civil rights.

Like Ned, Jimmy goes away to receive an education and comes back a civil rights advocate. Jimmy also calls upon the community to stand up for their own rights, and exactly like Ned he gets shot by a white man after doing so. Jimmy's story appears to be a repetition of Ned's story. Initially it seems as though the fifty years that have passed have not changed a thing in the dominant society, politics, or in the minds of the African Americans of the parish; again, they do not want to accept what the civil rights leader tells them. The minister replies to Jimmy's request for help with the demonstration that "'all we want to do is live our life quietly as we can and die peacefully as the Lord will allow us. We would like to die in our homes, have our funerals in our church, be buried in that graveyard where all our people and loved ones are'" (224). However, there is a significant difference in the motivation of the parish's response in the two stories. Even though the people do not initially respond positively to Jimmy's request, it is not because they do not understand him. Rather, they are afraid that the plantation owner will throw them off his land when he finds out that they have demonstrated; this has already happened to one woman whose son was demonstrating for civil rights. As Jane explains to Jimmy, "'I have a scar on my back I got when I was a slave. I'll carry it to my grave. You got people out there with this scar on their brains, and they'll take that scar to their grave. The mark of fear, Jimmy, is not easily removed'" (225). One reason

the people of the parish are afraid is that almost all of them are old; most of the young people have left years before to go to the city or to go North. This means that the generation that Jimmy is talking to is largely the generation that Ned was addressing rather than a new generation, or his own generation.

The attitude of the people changes when they find out on the day of the demonstration that Jimmy has been shot. This is an important turning point in the story; first of all, it shows how, over time, the people of the parish have changed their minds regarding civil rights. After Ned's death the people glorified him as a hero, but did nothing to finish the work he started, but the reaction after Jimmy's death is wholly different. After the message of Jimmy's death reaches the parish, over half of the people that live there agreed to go to the demonstration, even though after Jimmy's initial appeal only four people had agreed to go, including Miss Jane and Jimmy's grandmother. When the plantation owner, Robert Samson, tells them to go home, one of the boys replies, "'them who want to go to Bayonne, let's go to Bayonne….Let's go to Bayonne even if we got to come back here to nothing.' 'What you think you go'n find in Bayonne, boy?' Robert said. 'Jimmy,' Alex said. 'Jimmy is dead,' Robert said… 'He ain't dead nothing,' Alex said" (244). Eventually, Miss Jane settles the argument by correcting Alex' words: "'just a little piece of him is dead…The rest of him is waiting for us in Bayonne'" (244). This shows that, after he is killed, the community regards Jimmy as a symbol rather than a hero. Moreover, by demonstrating and carrying out the work that Jimmy had initiated they acknowledge that anyone can fight for civil rights. They have come to see Jimmy as only one representative of the civil rights movement; "the rest of him is waiting for us in Bayonne." Thus, even though Jimmy has died, what he was fighting for is still vital; Jimmy has become a part of the struggle that Ned already described fifty years before.

Jimmy's death does not only mark an important turning point in the mindset of the parish people; it also shows an essential change in the role of Miss Jane. Only a few hours before his death, Miss Jane told Jimmy that "'People and time bring forth leaders,…[l]eaders don't bring forth people. The people and the time brought [Martin Luther] King; King didn't bring the people'" (226). Miss Jane here responds to Jimmy's request to the parish to come and demonstrate. She explains herself and says, "'the people here ain't ready for nothing yet, Jimmy….Something got to get in the air first. Something got to start floating out there and they got to feel it. It got to seep all through their flesh" (226). Miss Jane argues that Jimmy, by means of his appeal to demonstrate, is actually trying to make things happen the wrong way around. In Jane's opinion, first something needs to happen, then as a consequence the people will rise, and finally a leader will step forth to guide the people. Ironically that event turns out to be Jimmy's murder. When Jimmy dies, the people rise; they are finally ready to protest. However, wholly against Miss Jane's own expectation, the one who takes the lead is not another civil rights leader from outside the parish; Miss Jane, in loving memory of Jimmy, takes the lead herself.

According to Robert Patterson, Gaines's decision to make Miss Jane a key figure in a civil rights demonstration "serves as an early corrective to the masculinization of civil rights, civil rights leadership, and even the civil rights movement" (341). Patterson argues that "whereas master narratives of black civil rights struggles emerging in the late 1960s and flourishing into the 1980s reinforced exodus politics' guiding principles by suggesting that the black freedom struggle had been fought and won only by men… Gaines diverges from this trend in an effort to provide a more nuanced historiography of the civil rights movement" (342). Patterson uses the phrase "exodus politics" for "the political strategy African Americans have invoked to argue for civil and political rights" (340). Patterson describes that the guiding principles of exodus politics show tendencies to only emphasize the racial side of

civil rights; moreover the black man is regarded as the a necessary leader; there is no place for women as leaders (340). The fact that Jane eventually develops into a civil rights advocate and the leader of a demonstration only underlines the importance of "humanhood" over masculinity; she is the one who acts the way Ned asks in his speech when he says "I want my children to be men".

In conclusion, "man's way", according to the story of Joe Pittman, is to have a purpose for which one is willing to face danger and even die. According to Gaines, his characters just try to be men, but the stories of Ned and Jimmy show that to be men in the segregated South is to risk death. However, the story of Ned makes it clear that a distinction must be made between masculinity and manhood in a more gender-neutral sense. Ned's speech implies that in order to be American and (hu)man, black people must overcome double consciousness; only when black people believe that they are equal to white people will they be able to believe that they deserve to be treated as equals to them, and have the same rights. At the end of the nineteenth century, when Ned delivers his speech to Jane's parish, the people do not understand what he means; they revere him as a hero for arguing that blacks deserve equal rights to whites. They do not realize that all Ned is asking for is for them to be treated as human beings. It is only when Jimmy is killed some fifty years later that the parish recognizes what Ned meant. Even though the people's reaction regarding the struggle for civil rights appears to be similar to fifty years before at first, Jimmy's death eventually leads to the parish people demonstrating for equality. Miss Jane is the one who takes the lead in the parish to go demonstrate. In doing so, she fulfills the wish Ned had when he said, "I'm telling you all this because I want my children to be men…I want my children to fight. Fight for all –not just for a corner" (110). Moreover, Miss Jane proves that one does not need to be a man to fight; rather the struggle for civil rights is one of all African Americans, men and women alike. *Miss*

Jane stresses the importance of manhood rather than masculinity, of being human rather than being a man.

Chapter Two

Agency Through Community: Reclaiming Manhood in *A Gathering of Old Men*

Whereas *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) is a novel that examines what it means to be a "man", Gaines's novel *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) investigates the possibilities of becoming a man and reclaiming manhood. *A Gathering* is told from the point of view of eighteen African American men; all of the chapters are written as first-person narratives, however, with alternating narrators. In most of the chapters the narrator is one of the old men, all of whom admit to having committed the same murder. In doing so they do not only try to protect the man they believe to be the actual murderer, Mathu, but also to free themselves from the oppression that they have endured their entire lives. The men in *A Gathering* break away from their victimhood by means of communal strength. Whereas in *Jane Pittman* there is a focus on men who rise to leadership in the civil Rights movement, the focus in *A Gathering* is on men who try to overcome white supremacy without such a leader. The novel is set in the 1970s, after the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), which were the main achievements of the civil rights movement. However, despite the time in which it is set, the novel does not depict a drastically changed South. According to Terrence Tucker,

> The novel reveals a southern landscape that is barely changed and could—in its look and its relationship—easily be mistaken for a pre-1960s South. Gaines's novel resists an optimistic narrative that the Civil Rights Movement was immediately transformative to the South. Instead, Gaines shifts his focus to consider the maintenance of white supremacist ideals in post-Civil Rights America as the characters wrestle with the opportunity to finally confront the racist oppression they have been silently enduring. (114)

Rather than to show a South that has completely changed since the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, Gaines attempts to show how, even though by law all are equal, the ideas and ideals of Southern whites have not necessarily changed along with the legislation.

The central event of the novel is the murder of Beau Boutan, a Cajun farmer. Beau and his family lease farming lands from rich Creoles in the area. The Boutans are infamous for the especially violent way in which they have treated African Americans in the region for generations. In order to protect Mathu, the old man that everyone assumes has committed the murder, eighteen men confess to have murdered Beau. The men are called to the plantation by Candy Marshall, who is the owner of the land on which they live. Candy was raised on the plantation; Mathu played a significant part in her upbringing and she sees him as a father figure. Candy, like the old men, admits to the murder; she does so only to protect Mathu. The old men use their confessions as a way to protect Mathu as well, but their confessions additionally serve as a means to reclaim their own manhood, as well as a means to make up for their absence in the civil rights struggles of the past. In this chapter I will first of all discuss the importance of age and generation in the context of white supremacy in Louisiana in the 1960s, and why age and generation are essential to the novel. Secondly I will explain how the men use their confession to the murder as a means to make up for their lack of involvement in the civil rights struggles of the past. I will argue that by admitting to Beau's murder the men seek redemption and eventually prove the possibility of reclaiming manhood. Lastly, I will consider whether the definition of this manhood is focussed on men and masculinity or on being human and humanity in general, as it is in *Jane Pittman*.

The Boutan family in *A Gathering* represent the failure of the white South to change its mindset right after the Voting and Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s. The Boutans are a Cajun family from Bayonne. According to Maria Herbert-Leiter, "Gaines places the Cajun between the Creole landowners and the African American laborers" (95). The Cajuns occupy an

intermediate position between the poor black farmers and the rich whites; since they are white, their racial status places them above blacks. However, since they are usually poor and own no lands, their social status places them below the rich Creoles. When it came to farming, as is the case in *A Gathering*, Cajuns were offered better lands than black farmers because of their skin color. This is described by Cherry, one of the old men: "Beau Boutan was leasing the land from the Marshall family, Beau and his family had been leasing all the land the past twenty-five, thirty years. The very same land we had worked, our people had worked" (43). As a result of this division of lands, the economic position of Cajuns became, like their racial status, an intermediate one between the poor blacks and the rich Creoles (95). Since the economic prosperity of Cajun farmers depended on the color of their skin, they made an effort to maintain the hegemony of white supremacy. An example of this effort in the novel is the Cajun character Luke Will, a family friend of the Boutans. Luke Will is a member of the Ku Klux Klan; he uses violence and intimidation to keep the black farmhands from standing up against their Cajun bosses. The Boutans themselves are also responsible for a lot of violence against blacks in the area; the stories the old men tell in their narratives about their inability to stand up for themselves or their friends and family all have the Boutans in common as the inflictors of violence. Thus, white superiority is maintained in two ways in the novel. First of all by the Creole landowners, who make sure that the white lower class obtains better farmlands than blacks. Secondly, the white lower class maintains its superiority over African Americans by means of physical and mental violence.

In the novel, Gaines shows that the way in which white male characters treat African Americans is heavily reliant on their age and generation. Three different generations are described in the novel: those who had already reached old age before the Voting and Civil Rights Acts, those who had just reached adulthood before these acts, and those who reached adulthood afterwards. Fix Boutan, Beau's father, is the character who is most representative

of violence in the region; most of the old men describe confrontations they have had with Fix in the past. Fix is around seventy years old; he is part of the same generation as the old men themselves. Beau was much younger than his father, but he still became an adult before the implementation of the Civil Rights and Voting Acts. Because his generation grew up in a segregated South Beau's generation still treats African Americans as before despite the legislation.

Luke Will is of the same generation as Beau. As a member of the Ku Klux Klan he strives to maintain the white supremacist hegemony. As Chalmers points out, over the years the Klan faced various changes including disbandment (1869), a great decline in members during the Great Depression, and a change in focus to anti-Semitism and anti-communism in the thirties. However, the Klan's original focus on the "restoration of social order" (i.e., maintaining white supremacy and black inferiority) became its top priority again after the 1954, when the Supreme Court decision ended the segregation of public schools (Chalmers 5, 6). Chalmers argues that "no portion of the Invisible Empire became more notorious than the Louisiana realm of the Ku Klux Klan" (59) due to the especially violent way in which Klan members treated their enemies. Luke Will is a representative of these notoriously violent Louisiana clansmen. This becomes clear, for instance, when Fix eventually decides to leave the sheriff to deal with the old men, rather than to seek out confrontation himself. Luke Will responds to this by asking if they should "'let those niggers stand there with guns, and we don't accommodate them? They want war let's give them war" (145). Even though Fix tells him to stay away, Luke Will decides to round up some other Klansmen and goes to Mathu's yard with the intention of killing the old men.

According to Gaines, Luke Will represents a new type of Klansman who does not feel the need to don a white disguise at night. In an interview with Mary Ellen Doyle, Gaines argues that "the Klan doesn't come on horse as nightriders now, you have pick-up trucks and

CB radios. So Fix's kind of vigilante vengeance is dying out, but there will be the new Luke Will type. The Luke Wills are in the police department. Fix is seventy or eighty and can't shoot straight, but Luke Will will do it for him" (169). He said in a different interview with Jeanie Blake that "the laws are there, but they can be broken. The Klan is just as much in effect today. They used to wear sheets; now they don't have to wear sheets. They can just parade down the streets any time they wish" (138). This is indeed what Luke Will does; before he goes to the old men with the intention to kill them, he visits a bar and boasts about what he going to do. He feels no need to hide his intentions. Luke Will represents an intermediate generation between Fix and those that came of age after the passing of the Civil Rights and Voting Acts. He has consciously lived through the civil rights politics of the 1960s (possibly also the 1950s, since his age is not specifically mentioned) and the eventual adoption of the Voting and Civil Rights Acts. However, he has spent most of his life in a segregated South where his superiority as a white man was constantly confirmed and underlined. Luke Will is an example of one whose ideas have not changed along with US legislation and policies; when segregation ended he decided, rather than to treat blacks as equals, to reinforce ideas of white superiority as a vigilante. What separates him from Fix's generation is his age. Luke Will has the same mentality as the older generations, however; he is not too old to respond to what he believes to be a wrong racial and social order.

In addition to Beau, Fix has another son named Gil who is a college football player. Gil represents the new generation: those that reached adulthood after the passing of the Civil Rights and Voting Acts. According to his friend Sully, "'Gil loved all the people back here, and they all loved him, white and black. He would shake a black man's hand as soon as he would a white man's'" (131). Gil has a very different attitude towards African Americans than his father and brother do. He plays college football side by side with a black student named Cal with whom he is also good friends; the two of them are even referred to as "Salt

and Pepper" in the local news. Moreover, Gil does not live on the farm and he does not plan to do so in the future. Gil returns home when he hears about his brother's death. However, before he drives to his father's house he visits Mathu's yard, where the old men are gathering. He tells his father that "'I saw something there, Papa – something you, I, none of us in this room has ever seen before. A bunch of old black men with shotguns, Papa. Old men, your age…Waiting for you'" (136). Fix initially sees this as a provocation; if they are waiting for him with shotguns, he will come. However, Gil continues and tells his father that the men are "'old men, Papa. Cataracts. Hardly any teeth. Arthritic. Old men. Old black men, Papa. Who have been hurt. Who wait – not for you, Papa – for what you're supposed to represent'" (137). Gil immediately distances himself from his father's practices: "'All my life I have heard what my family have done to others. I hear it today – from the blacks, from the whites. I hear it from opponents even when we play in another town. Don't tackle me too hard because they would have to answer to the rest of the Boutans" (137). Gil realizes the truth in the remarks of others in regard to his father's, and his family's violent history. However, he does not consider himself as part of the tradition.

Through the depiction of these three generations of white lower-class men and how they treat African Americans, Gaines shows the social struggle after the implementation of the Civil Rights and Voting Acts. Rather than to depict the South as a drastically changed place after the 1964 legislation Gaines shows the difficulties that arose after black men were granted equal rights to white men. He shows a clear distinction in mind-set between the three generations of white men in the novel. First of all, there are those who support the white supremacist hegemony, but are too old to maintain it with violence. Secondly, there are those who support the white supremacist hegemony and strive to maintain it with violence and intimidation. Thirdly, there are those who acknowledge the African Americans' equal rights, and who do not support the vigilante force that wishes to oppress African Americans.

The implementation of the Civil Rights and Voting Acts was not only a great change in mind-set for white Americans; for African Americans the change in mind-set was just as great. In the storylines of the old men Gaines illustrates the difficulties that arose for those African Americans who had lived through Reconstruction and segregation, those who had never even remotely experienced equality to whites. The 1970s South that Gaines portrays is not only unchanged because of those members of the white Southern population who strive to keep the white supremacist system intact; the system is also kept intact because there is no protest from the African Americans that are portrayed in the novel. In this sense the events that take place after the murder of Beau can be seen as a first sign of protest from the old African American men in the community.

Eighteen men admit to having committed the murder on Beau Boutan; all of them are in their seventies or eighties. They decide to form a pact in order to protect another old man named Mathu, who they believe has actually committed the crime. Mathu is described by one of the old men, Chimley, as "the only one we knowed that had ever stood up"; therefore, he adds, "if Mathu did it we ought to be there" (31). All the old men have similar reasons to join the pact. Mathu is the only one of them who has ever dared to openly question the white hegemony; he has even had a few physical fights with white men to defend his rights and principles. Chimley mentions one fight in his narrative where Mathu is ordered by Fix, Beau's father, to bring an empty bottle back to a store. According to Chimley, "Mathu told him he wasn't nobody's servant. Fix told him he had to take the bottle back to the store or fight…Mathu didn't, Fix hit him –and the fight was on… For an hour it was toe to toe. But when it was over, Mathu was up, and Fix was down" (30). Because Mathu dares to stand up for himself, he is respected by the other men; by defending him against Beau's family members (whom they believe are planning to kill Beau's murderer) he becomes a common

cause for them to unite over. Up until their pact to admit to Beau's murder they have always been individuals; this is the first time they act as a group or community.

Mathu's strength and his lack of fear to stand up for himself set a standard for the rest of the men to judge themselves by. According to one of the old men, named Rufe, it is not only the black men who respect Mathu. For example, Mapes, the white sheriff of Bayonne, does so as well. Rufe says about Mapes that "Mapes was a lot of things. He was big, mean, brutal. But Mapes respected a man. Mathu was a man, and Mapes respected Mathu. But he didn't think much of the rest of us, and he didn't respect us" (84). Again, one of the men makes a comparison between himself and Mathu: first of all, he is the only one that dares to stand up for himself. Secondly, he is the only one who is respected by the white sheriff. Thirdly, Mathu is the only one of them who is a man; though Mapes respects men, he does not respect the other old men. In the eyes of Rufe, Mathu is the only man present; he does not regard himself or the others as real men. Rufe's words echo those of Ned in *Jane Pittman*. Ned argued in 1899 already that the difference between a black American and a "nigger" is the difference between daring to fight for your rights and accepting whatever happens to you without protest because you think things will never look up anyway. What Rufe describes is that, in terms of behaviour, Mathu has been the only one of the men to ever truly behave as a black American. When the men decide to protect Mathu, they simultaneously decide to lift themselves out of the subordinate position that they have lived in their entire lives; they become black Americans.

The men's attempt at redemption by means of saving Mathu's life can be also considered an attempt to overcome their double consciousness. Like the community in *Jane Pittman*, the old men have internalized the notion of double consciousness and suffer from an inferiority complex. Not even at times when terrible things happened to their family members did the old men feel able to respond adequately. The sole reason for their inability is the fact

that their aggressors were white. Tucker, one of the old men, describes how he stood by while white men killed his brother. Tucker's brother was the last sharecropper in the area, the rest of the land was farmed by the Boutans, who used machines. Although Tucker's brother only had two mules, he managed to "beat the tractor". Tucker explains that his brother "'wasn't supposed to win. How can flesh and blood and nigger win against white man and machine? So they beat him. They took stalks of cane and they beat him and beat him and beat him.'" Tucker describes that he himself "'didn't do nothing but stand there and watch them beat my brother down to the ground…even after I had seen what happened –in my fear, I went along with the white folks. Out of fear of a little pain to my own body, I beat my own brother with a stalk of cane as much as the white folks did"' (97). Now that he is standing up to his white oppressors he is overcoming his sense of inferiority and makes up for his inadequate behaviour of the past.

Tucker's inferiority complex is reflected in his inability to stand up to white men; however, his inferior position is also confirmed in events outside of himself. Tucker asks Mapes where the law was when his brother died. He argues that this is the "law for a nigger" (97): to be beaten to death with a stalk of cane for being a successful sharecropper. Tucker's sense of inferiority is fed by the lack of consequences for those whites who abuse and even kill African Americans. This is confirmed in the story of Gable, whose son was unjustly convicted for raping a white girl. After he had died in the electric chair, Gable describes, "after it was all over with, them white folks walked out of that room like they was leaving a card game. They wasn't even talking about it. It wasn't worth talking about"' (102). Gable also says that there was no use to protesting against his son's conviction with the white men who convicted him because, since he was black, no white man found his life worth the time of even discussing the case. Like Tucker, Gable stands by and does not act; he is afraid of the consequences.

Apart from the African Americans' inferior status, the especially violent actions against African Americans in Bayonne have made them fearful of whites. The Boutan family and their Klan friends are the main cause for this fear. Out of fear and a sense of inferiority they have taken on a subordinate role. The consequence of this, according to Suzanne W. Jones, is that "the subordinate position of these old black men has not only lowered their self-esteem, it has caused doubts about their manhood, which they, like the white men they work for, define in traditional terms as providing for and protecting their families (17). Jones here reinforces the implications of Ned's speech in *Jane Pittman*; in order to be and consider oneself a man it is critical to overcome double consciousness. The stories of the old men resemble the story of Joe, who is unable to stand up to his white boss and thus loses all of his possessions and savings; he consequently loses (if only for a brief period of time) the ability to provide for his family and to protect his loved ones.

Mathu himself comments on the subject of manhood as well. He argues that "'a man got to do what he think is right'…'That what part him from a boy'" (85). After Mathu's comment on being a man, the other men start to name moments when they did not do what was right: Jacob's sister was lynched and he did not do anything; Ding's infant niece was raped and he did not act; Clatoo's sister was raped and sent to jail for fighting the men that raped her, but Clatoo did nothing. The men discuss these things while they are together in Mathu's yard; they all know each other's stories from hear-say, but this is the first time that they actually talk about these events out loud; as Tucker comments, "I ain't been able to talk about it before….Been in here all these years, boiling in me" (96). Jones argues that in contrast to Mathu, the old men "have been 'boys' all their lives, not only in the eyes of the white men they have worked for but also in their own eyes" (17). Jones explains that the old men have never been able to develop into actual men; "[they were] born after Reconstruction failed in the South, they have grown up only to be beaten down by racial prejudice and boxed

in by Jim Crow laws that have kept them in an inferior position socially and economically" (17). The men have been kept "boys" by the racist environment they have lived in their entire lives; they have never felt able to act. However, because the white men have not been able to successfully oppress Mathu, he takes on an almost symbolic role; he is a man, and by saving his life the old men can not only redeem themselves, but they themselves can become men as well.

The narratives of the old men are not just an attempt to overcome double consciousness, they also struggle to overcome white supremacy and oppression. During the lives of the old men, the economic gap between whites and blacks has only become larger. The Marshalls, the rich Creole family that own the land on which the Cajuns and African Americans work and live, have distributed the best farming land to the Cajuns. As one of the old men argues, "we had got the worst land from the start, and no matter how hard we worked it, the people with the best land was always go'n be in front" (94). According to Tucker,

> [The] story reveals the shift in white supremacy and privilege from the end of slavery into segregation. Instead of the end of white supremacy, we merely see the realignment of racial hierarchy through the unfair distribution of the land. The Marshalls' unequal division of the land reiterates the tradition of white privilege, but it maintains an economic hierarchy that keeps both groups dependent on the Marshalls. (Tucker 117)

The Cajun farmers that are depicted in Gaines's novel occupy an intermediate social position between the rich white landowners, or Creoles, and the black farmers. However, they still represent a white community that oppresses a black community. Thus, there has not come an end to white supremacy; rather the supremacy over blacks has shifted from Creole alone, to Creole and Cajun.

Another thing that the old men try to overcome is double consciousness. In *Jane Pittman* the community was eventually able to overcome double consciousness with the help of members of the civil rights movement and Miss Jane, who carried out a task that was given to Jimmy by that same movement. The community in *A Gathering* cannot count on the support of a movement that defends their best interest; that struggle and the glory days of the civil rights movement largely took place in the years before Beau's murder. None of the men were in any way involved in the civil rights movement. Whereas the community in *Jane Pittman* was visited by various civil rights advocates over the years, the old men seem hardly aware of the fact that there even was such a thing. Tucker argues that "the men in the novel seek redemption for a lifetime of inactivity from the front lines of the civil rights movement" (114). Their lack of involvement in the civil rights movement contributes to their unchanged mind set in regard of their status; even after the implementation of the Voting and Civil Rights Acts the men have continued to react as though no change has taken place. Thus, it initially appears that Gaines's depiction of the South after the Civil Rights and Voting Acts is not an especially optimistic one. According to Tucker, "Gaines shifts his focus to consider the maintenance of white supremacist ideals in post-Civil Rights America as the characters wrestle with the opportunity to finally confront the racist oppression they have been silently enduring" (114). Gaines's emphasis on the maintenance of white supremacist ideals is definitely a major focus in the novel. However, as Stephen Tuck argues,

> The celebrated figures of the 1960s were often civil rights clergymen, middle-class students and - during the Black Power era - young male militants. But in the 1970s, African American groups such as welfare activists, feminists, and even the imprisoned were able to make demands for their distinctive causes with unprecedented force. (642)

Tuck proposes a more optimistic view. He argues that the 1960s were the civil rights glory days for prominent figures and strong social groups such as militant men; the 1970s, however, were the years for socially weaker groups such as women and the imprisoned, but also the elderly to explore and defend their newly acquired civil rights. Thus, the 1970s can be seen as a period in which the civil rights struggle became a struggle of the community as a whole, with the inclusion of weaker groups, rather than a struggle led by individual leaders. Tuck argues that "previously sidelined groups within the African American community found their collective voices during the 1970s" (642). Thus, rather than to consider the climate in which the old men live as "unchanged," it is more apt to consider it as "not yet changed."

The climax of the old men's struggle to free themselves from the consequences of white supremacy is a confrontation with Luke Will and his fellow Klansmen. Even though Fix decides to leave the old men for the law to deal with, Luke Will decides to pay them a visit with the intention of fighting them. This confrontation leads into a shootout between the old men and the Klansmen. The moments before the shooting are pivotal in the old men's attempt to overcome their double consciousness. Only shortly before the shooting, Sherriff Mapes hears that Fix Boutan has decided not to come to the old men. Because Fix will not show up the old men will not get a chance to fight him; they are disappointed that their chance to redeem themselves is taken away. Mapes realizes that the old men's "show is over" (172); he tries to take Mathu in. However, all the other men and Candy block his way. Up until then Candy has done the same as the old men; she says she has committed the murder in order to protect Mathu. The men ask the Sherriff to give them some time to talk, which Mapes allows. When they enter the house Candy wants to go with them, but they refuse her entrance which she does not take lightly:

> ''Nobody's talking without me," Candy said…"This time we have to, Candy,"…
> "just the men with guns."… "We don't want you there this time." That stopped

> her. Nobody talked to Candy like that –black or white –and especially not black….
>
> "I already told the sheriff I don't mind going to jail, or even dying today. And that means I don't take orders either," Clatoo said. (173)

Even though Candy owns the land the old men live on, they dare to refuse her to join in their pact of redemption. They thank her for defending Mathu and make it clear to her that she can no longer be part of their gathering. Rather than acknowledging the men's need for privacy, Candy's reaction is to pose as the patriarchal and oppressive plantation owner of the past; she continues to remind the men whose land they live on and who can take their homes away. She does not quit to do so until the sheriff asks her "you want to keep them slaves the rest of their lives?" (174); this makes Candy realize the oppressive nature of her argument. However, the old men do not let Candy frighten them; they go in the house without her to discuss their own situation. Thus, they overcome the grip the Marshalls have had on them, and on generations before them. Simultaneously Candy realizes the oppressive force that she has exercised over the old men; even though her intention was to help them, she has unconsciously behaved as if she could give them orders. By standing up to Candy and clarifying to her that she cannot decide what they can and cannot do, the old men overcome their double consciousness and Candy's white supremacist control over them.

The men's attempt to overcome white supremacy is not only a matter of overcoming the Marshall family's control over them, as exercised through Candy. The old men also need to overcome the oppressive force of the local Cajun community. The Cajuns in *A Gathering* have made the old men and their families endure a lot of physical violence; beatings and lynching were common. When the old men hear that Fix is not coming they are first of all disappointed that they will not fight him. Jones compares the old men's desire to fight a physical enemy with Gil Boutan's response to his father. Jones argues that "[the] young white man comes to maturity when he rejects his society's equation of masculinity with violence,

while the old black men become men when they enact this definition." She further explains that "[t]he young white man Gil attempts to break the cycle of racial violence that his father is known for by refusing to join his family in avenging his brother's death… The old black men break a cycle of paralysing fear which has led to passivity by responding, first verbally but then violently, to the attempt of white men to wield power over them" (14). Therefore, it seems that the only possible way for the men to overcome white supremacy is by violence, just as they were always oppressed by violence. However, simultaneously Gil's response to his father's call for violence, much like Candy's realization of her oppressive actions, shows that overcoming white supremacy is an effort on both the African Americans' part as well as that of the white people.

Eventually, the men find out that it was not Mathu who killed Beau, but Charlie, Mathu's grandson, who worked for Beau and was often beaten by him. Charlie murdered Beau because he could no longer stand the way he was treated by him. Charlie's statement confirms that he was only able to overcome white oppression (as represented by Beau) by means of a physical fight. He says to Mathu "'[Beau] cussed me for no reason at all. Nigger this, nigger that, for no cause at all. Just to 'buse me. And long as I was Big Charlie, nigger boy, I took it.'…'But they comes a day! They comes a day when a man must be a man!'" (189). He adds, "'I told him I was doing my work good…I told him he didn't need to cuss me like that… I told him no, I wasn't go'n 'low that no more…I told him I was quitting" (190). No matter what Charlie tells him, Beau will not listen and only threatens him with more physical violence. Eventually, Charlie sees no other way out than to fight Beau and he kills him.

After Charlie's confession Luke Will arrives at Mathu's house. His arrival sparks what is described by Marilyn C. Wesley as Gaines's way to "give the aged army its opportunity to battle" (120). According to Wesley, the men have then already acquired their new manly

status, an event that, Wesley argues, is marked by Clatoo when he addresses them with "gentlemen" while they are gathering in Mathu's house before Luke Will arrives (120). However, even though the men have already stood their ground and proven themselves, they still fight Luke Will and his friends. Their motivation is similar to that of Charlie; Luke Will is not willing to talk or listen. As mentioned, Luke Will is a prominent member of the Klan, and he represents more than just any white man; he represents a system of vigilante whites who have made it their duty to prevent any possibility of black autonomy and agency by means of extreme violence. By attacking and eventually killing Luke Will, the old men, who are now joined by Charlie, are not only attempting to overcome white oppression, but they also attack the systems that keep white dominance intact.

The old men in Gaines's novel struggle to overcome various aspects of their lives in oppression. First of all they try to restore their manhood by defending Mathu. The major issues that trigger them to not look upon themselves as men are their inability to defend their families and the people they love, and their inability to stand up for their rights. By sticking with Mathu, and eventually Charlie, until the end, they reclaim their manhood. However, the issues that caused them not to feel as men are symptoms of a greater problem; the men suffer from double consciousness. They eventually manage to overcome their double consciousness and the white people's oppression over them by standing up to Candy and by physically fighting members of the Ku Klux Klan. By eventually killing Luke Will, a Klansman, they symbolically kill the system that keeps white superiority in place and prevents black agency and autonomy.

The novel also highlights the importance of the community in the struggle against the white hegemony. As Clark comments, *A Gathering* showcases Gaines's "insistence that black men must renegotiate the terms for selfhood among a collectivity of other black men" (71). The old men are only able to overcome anything because they are together; because they are

willing to sacrifice themselves for each other. Throughout their lives they have felt themselves to be individuals, but by uniting as a group they eventually manage to overcome the forces that oppress them. The importance of the community is highlighted at the end of the novel when Candy, who protects the old men but simultaneously tries to control them, offers Mathu a ride home. Mathu replies that he will go with the other men in Clatoo's truck. According to Tucker "his refusal, and decision to ride with Clatoo, not only completes the negation of white privilege that Candy has attempted to benignly enact throughout the novel; it also uses Mathu's newfound respect for the other African American men as a clear stepping stone toward a progressive and inclusive southern identity and landscape" (122). Thus, the old men's sense of community has not only been a deciding factor in their own lives, it also shows the possibility of African American agency and autonomy in general when they act through their communities.

Moreover, the novel does not only show the possibility of the reconstruction of manhood, black agency, and overcoming white oppression. It also foreshadows reconciliation between black and white in the form of Gil and the other Boutans' response to Beau's killing. Gil represents a new generation; his main partner in his football team is a black young man. Their fans even refer to them as "Salt & Pepper". He is known on the Marshall plantation to shake the hands of black and white alike. Even his father, who has ordered and led many a lynching of African Americans in the area, resolves not to act. He does not do so especially willingly, but he realizes that the days of the vigilante are in the past and lets the law handle the situation. Luke Will, who represents the (Ku Klux Klan) vigilante systems that block all possibility of reconciliation by provoking violence in every conflict between black and white does not acknowledge Gil's call for pacifism. An example of this is Luke Will's attitude when Fix declares that he will not go and fight the old men without his sons present; Luke Will tries to convince Fix to go and kill the men anyway, with or without his sons. When he refuses,

Luke Will goes out of his way to make sure that Fix and Gil do not know that he is going to lynch the old men anyway. Luke Will represents a group that merely wants to inflict violence and feed conflict. He does not feel the urge to resolve anything; he only wishes to keep the white supremacist system intact. When he is killed there is an implication of a vision of the South without the destructive force of the Klan; one where reconciliation between African Americans and whites is possible.

Chapter Three

Enabling the Subaltern to Speak: Reconstructing Black Identity in *A Lesson Before Dying*

In Ernest J Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), similarly to *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), the focus is on the male characters' ability to restore manhood. However, the novels differ greatly in respect to the time in which they are set. Whereas *A Gathering of Old Men* is set in the post-civil rights movement South, *A Lesson Before Dying* is set in the 1940s, two decades before the Civil Rights and Voting Acts. Another great difference between the two novels lies in the disposition of the main characters. The old men in *A Gathering* are actively engaged in their own struggle for manhood and humanity. Jefferson, one of the main characters in *A Lesson*, on the other hand, is actively trying to prevent the struggle of those around him to help him regain his manhood. Jefferson is a mentally challenged African American man who is charged with robbery and murder. He was present at the crime scene, a liquor store, with a bottle of whiskey in his hand and all the money from the register in his pocket. However, he did not commit the murder. When on trial for the crimes, Jefferson is represented by a state-appointed lawyer, a white man who compares Jefferson to an animal, a hog, in order to prove his innocence. Despite his lawyer's attempt to have Jefferson cleared of all charges, he is sentenced to death in the electric chair. His attorney's plea causes Jefferson to be completely demoralized; he adopts hog-like qualities and no longer behaves in a human way. This change in Jefferson causes a lot of grief in his grandmother, Miss Emma. She refuses to let her grandson go to the electric chair as an animal; she persuades the parish teacher, Grant Wiggins, who is also the narrative voice in the novel, to help her grandson at least to regain his manhood before his death sentence is carried out. However, even though Grant agrees, he has his own doubts and internal conflict regarding the implications of

manhood and humanity. In this chapter I will argue by means of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theories on the subaltern that there is a possibility for Jefferson and Grant to represent themselves and speak for themselves despite the implication of white oppression. Moreover I will argue that by doing so, both Jefferson and Grant manage to break free from this oppression and regain manhood.

In terms of the definition provided by Spivak Jefferson is what is termed a "subaltern". Spivak uses the term subaltern for the colonized who are in a position where they cannot represent themselves and are simultaneously not justly represented by others. In an abbreviated publication of her 1988 text "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Spivak defines the "subaltern" as "a person without lines of social mobility" (28). In "Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular" Spivak argues that "subalternity is a position without identity" (476). Albert Memmi argues the following in regard to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized: he describes it as a "relationship which is lucrative, which creates privilege". For the colonizer the privilege is created because:

> [The colonizer] finds himself on one side of a scale, the other side of which bears the colonized man. If his living standards are high it is because those of the colonized are low; if he can benefit from plentiful and undemanding labor and servants, it is because the colonized men can be exploited at will and are not protected by the laws of the colony…; the more freely he breathes, the more the colonized are choked (52).

Moreover Memmi argues that the superior position of the colonizer, his privilege, does not go unnoticed to himself. Rather, Memmi points out that his privilege is known to him, but "there is no danger that official speeches might change his mind. For those speeches are drafted by him or his cousin or his friend" (52). Thus, the colonized lives under oppression from the colonizer; oppression that will last because the colonizer is the one who makes, controls, and

enforces the law. In this sense I would like to argue that Jefferson has a similar status to a colonized person.

Jefferson may not literally be one who inhabits a colonized area, however, but as an African American in the South of the 1940s he is treated by white Americans as a colonized person; he suffers from oppression by the white population, and he does not have the same rights as this white oppressor. His living standards are low in order for the white Americans' to be high; he is exploited and unprotected by the law so that the white American can benefit from his labor. Jefferson's inferior status does not go unnoticed to his white oppressors; rather, it is noticed and subsequently enforced by them. As such, Jefferson's position as an African American in the South of the 1940s is very much comparable to the position of the colonized that live under European reign. Simultaneously he is in a position where he cannot represent himself; he is not allowed to talk when he is on trial for instance. Moreover, he is unjustly represented by his lawyer; the white intellectual who speaks for him. Jefferson does not have lines of social mobility; he inhabits a position without identity. This means that Jefferson is, in fact, a subaltern.

The question that Spivak asks is, "Can the subaltern speak?", this question does not entail the possibility of the subaltern producing literal words, or sentences; the question asked is whether or not the subaltern can speak in their own voice, for themselves as it were. Spivak argues that the subaltern have not been allowed to speak for themselves. Rather, there is a dependence upon Western intellectuals to speak for, and as such represent, the subaltern (71). For Jefferson this person is his lawyer. Spivak argues against the notion of the Western intellectual as "transparent" (70), one who is merely a bystander. Rather, she argues that "the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self's shadow" (75). Thus, rather than justly represent the subaltern, the intellectual represents the subaltern as not merely an Other, but as the shadow of the European. This is indeed what happens when

Jefferson's lawyer delivers his plea. Jefferson's lawyer says: "'gentlemen of the jury, look at this –this –this boy. I almost said man, but I can't say man. Oh sure, he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this – this – this a man? … I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this"' (Gaines 7-8). Jefferson is not only made out to be uncivilized, an opposite of the "gentlemen of the jury"; he is presented not even as a man. Rather, Jefferson is an animal, so different from a white man that his difference from the white men who are present cannot even be expressed in terms of humanity. As such, Jefferson is constituted by his lawyer as the shadow of the white men in the courtroom.

Besides the misrepresentation by Western academics that the subaltern endures, Spivak's conclusion is that the subaltern cannot in fact speak for themselves (104). However, this does not mean that there is no possibility for the subaltern to speak in the future; Spivak's view is more optimistic than that. I would like to argue that, since the misrepresentation of the subaltern is due to the Western academic's incapability of properly speaking for the subaltern, the subaltern would be capable of speaking for themselves if they were to receive an education. The subaltern would then be able to express themselves through writing, rather than to be misrepresented in the writing of the Western academic.

Education presents itself to Jefferson in the form of Grant Wiggins, the elementary schoolteacher in the rural parish in Louisiana where Jefferson grows up. Grant is unable to find fulfillment in his role as an educator due to the lack of influence he finds his teaching to have on the community. Whilst visiting Jefferson in prison, Grant tells him "I teach, but I don't like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the South today" (191). Grant's main problem with teaching is his inability to reach the children that he teaches. Grant feels, not without reason, that the elementary education he provides has no use, and that history only repeats itself for African Americans in the South;

the black children are only educated to a level that poses no threat to white hegemony. They receive more education that their parents and grandparents, but are still unable to escape the harsh circumstances they were born into. Grant's doubts concerning his effectiveness as a teacher are confirmed, for instance, when the boys in the school chop up wood delivered by some old men from the parish for the winter. Grant watches the boys work in the yard and contemplates: "what am I doing? Am I reaching them at all? They are acting exactly as the old men did earlier. They are fifty years younger, maybe more, but doing the same thing those old men did who never attended school a day in their lives" (62). As Jeffrey Folks puts it, Grant is aggravated by the boys' enthusiasm because "watching the enjoyment of his fifth- and sixth-graders sawing and chopping wood (tasks familiar to their ancestors in slavery times) Grant had wondered if he had taught them anything. Repeating the lives of the older black men, the boys show little interest in the educational skills that, Grant believes, will lift them out of rural poverty" (264). Grant sees the enthusiasm that the children show whilst chopping wood as a confirmation of both their inability and unwillingness to escape their present situation.

Grant's response to his students' lack of ambition is similar to the contempt his own teacher, Mr. Antoine, felt towards his students. While Grant watches the boys chop wood he is reminded of Mr. Antoine and remembers that "he had told us then that most of us would die violently, and those who did not would be brought down to the level of beasts. Told us that there was no choice but to run and run…[I]n him –he did not tell us this, but we felt it –there was nothing but hatred for himself as well as contempt for us" (62). When Grant visits Mr. Antoine after he has become a teacher himself, the old man says to him: '"I told you what you should have done, but no, you wanted to stay. Well, you will believe me one day. When you see that those five and a half months you spend in that church each year are just a waste of time, you will"' (64). He tells Grant where his hate for his students stems from and explains

‘“you’ll see that it’ll take more than five and a half months to wipe away –peel –scrape away the blanket of ignorance that has been plastered and replastered over those brains in the past three hundred years”’(65). Mr. Antoine refers here to the time of slavery and the oppression that African Americans have endured over the centuries. He also emphasizes the assumption that Grant has already made himself; despite teaching, history still repeats itself in the quarters. Thus, as a result of his disappointment, Grant gradually comes to adopt the same hostile feelings for his students; he too finds that history repeats itself in the rural South and, rather than blaming the system, directs his anger and frustration at the students who mimic the old men’s behavior.

The socioeconomic circumstances of African Americans in general in the Jim Crow South of the 1940s are another reason for Grant to doubt the effect of teaching in the parish. According to Crisu, “in the segregated South of the late 1940s, where the doctrine ‘separate but equal’ actually meant ‘separated but unequal,’ Grant is able to recognize the social and economic reasons that made many white people oppose any education for blacks.” The white elite “consciously denied [blacks] access to knowledge” because “African Americans were needed as a source of cheap labor” (Crisu 164). Carlyle van Thompson argues about the 1940s in the South that “during this time, America’s white supremacist society, supported by the violence of the Ku Klux Klan and many other white supremacist groups, attempted to keep most blacks oppressed by substandard economic conditions and by making the black skin a badge of degradation and dehumanization” (137). Moreover, black Americans are treated as less than human by white Americans. For instance, when Dr. Joseph, the school superintendent, visits Grant’s school and inspects the children’s hands and teeth, Grant is reminded of “slave masters who had done the same when buying new slaves, and I had heard of cattlemen doing it when purchasing new horses and cattle” (56). Dr. Joseph continues to instruct the children that “beans were good. Not just good, but very, very good. He must have

said beans a hundred times….And exercise was good. Picking cotton, gathering potatoes, pulling onions, working in the garden –all of that was good exercise for a growing boy and girl" (56). Dr. Joseph consciously maintains the status quo by instructing the children that the limited resources that are available to them (such as beans) are especially healthy. Moreover he praises hard labor as a means to stay fit. He consciously tries to manipulate the children in order to protect the white supremacist system. Thus, Grant's apprehensions are confirmed time after time.

Grant is eventually able to set aside the attitude he has gradually taken on in regard to his students, and elementary education in general, in the process of teaching Jefferson. Despite Grant's reluctance to teach, he acquiesces to Miss Emma's request to "make [Jefferson] know he's not a hog, he's a man. I want him to know that 'fore he go to that chair" (21). Miss Emma wants Grant to help Jefferson because he is the teacher; she has a faith in education that Grant himself no longer has. Grant asks Miss Emma, "'what do you want me to do?...What can I do? It's only a matter of weeks, a couple of months, maybe. What can I do that you haven't done the past twenty-one years?' 'You the teacher,' she said" (13). Miss Emma insists on Grant's presence in Jefferson's last months. She even choses the help of the teacher over the minister to have Jefferson overcome his dehumanized status. Miss Emma acknowledges that Jefferson can only be rid of his subaltern status by means of education; this is a wholly different matter than saving his soul, which is what the minister is there to do.

Religion is an important theme in Gaines's work. In *A Lesson* the role of religion differs greatly from its role in Gaines's other novels. William R. Nash argues that "although professional religious figures rarely play prominent roles in Gaines's stories, none of his works overlook the issue of religion and its impact on the African-American community. Throughout most of his corpus, that impact is primarily negative" (346). Indeed, the minister in *A Gathering* is the only old man who does not try to help Mathu; he stands by passively

with the old women and children, while the others are struggling. The minister in *Jane Pittman* displays only cowardice when he replies "'all we want to do is live our life quietly as we can and die peacefully as the Lord will allow us"' to Jimmy when he requests help with a civil rights demonstration (224). Both ministers show passivity and cowardice, and neither has a positive impact on the community. Nash agrees that the negative image of the church in Gaines's fiction is largely the result of "the consistent weakness of the preachers who minister to the communities Gaines portrays" (346). However, as opposed to the religious figures in *Jane Pittman* and *A Gathering*, the minister in *A Lesson* plays a prominent as well as a positive role. Reverend Ambrose's role is active and positive, as opposed to the passive and negative role of the religious figures in *Jane Pittman* and *A Gathering*.

Reverend Mose Ambrose has a mission of his own in the novel; he wants Jefferson's soul to be saved. Because Reverend Ambrose knows that Jefferson listens to Grant, he asks him for his help. However, this results in conflict when Grant tells the minister that he does not believe in heaven and refuses to tell Jefferson lies in the short time he has left. The Reverend, however, is more than willing to engage in conflict with Grant. He tells him "you look down on me, because you know I lie. I lie at wakes and funerals to relieve pain. 'Cause reading, writing, and 'rithmetic is not enough. You think that's all they sent you to school for? They sent you to school to relieve pain, to relieve hurt –and if you have to lie to do it, then you lie" (218). Reverend Ambrose admits that he does not necessarily believe all that he preaches, but he argues that it is his role to relieve pain; despite doubts that he has himself he uses his position to provide solace for the people in the parish. Grants calls this "lying", but Reverend Ambrose does not agree with him; he argues that the lies are just a means of consolation. Ambrose admits that he may not be certain of heaven, or hell, or God, or the afterlife, but he his certain that the parish people need to hear about those things for comfort. He wants Grant to do the same; he finds Grant's refusal to "lie" a selfish decision. Folks

argues that "what Grant sees as his own intellectual 'honesty,' his refusal to 'lie' to Jefferson about his skepticism concerning the afterlife, amounts to an abnegation of participation in a particular community. It is a refusal to take seriously the belief system of the time and place in which he lives" (263). As David E. Vancil puts it, "Wiggins is immersed in his own concerns and relates to his community from a perspective of superiority –a superiority as much bestowed as felt" (489). Grant feels superior to the community because he has had an education. His role as an educated man and a teacher causes the people to look up to him, but it simultaneously causes Grant to look down own them, rather than to help them.

Reverend Ambrose is the only one who addresses Grant's feelings of superiority and resentment towards the rest of the community. The Reverend points out to Grant that having an education does not make him a man: "'don't you turn you back on me, boy.' 'My name is Grant,' I said. 'When you educated I'll call you Grant. I'll even call you Mr Grant, when you act like a man'" (216). He explains to Grant that lying to relieve the pain of others is not a sign of ignorance; it is a means to support them. He uses Grant's aunt as an example: "'she been lying every day of her life, your aunt in there. That's how you got through that university.'… 'I've seen her hands bleed from picking cotton…You ever looked at the scabs on her knees, boy? Course you never. 'Cause she never wanted you to see them" (218). Only by lying to Grant, by telling him that she was fine when she was not, was his aunt able to support his education. Ironically, the result of her support is that Grant has given her arrogance and pride in return for her sacrifice. The Reverend ends the argument by saying "'and that's the difference between me and you, boy; that make me the educated one, and you the gump. I know my people. I know what they gone through. I know they done cheated themselves, lied to themselves –hoping that the one they all love and trust can come back and help relieve the pain" (218). Grant gains an insight into the feelings of contempt that he feels and he realizes that his negative attitude will neither benefit the community, nor himself. Thus,

by providing Grant with insight into the consequences of his behavior, and by inspiring him to change, Reverend Ambrose plays a transformative role.

Towards the end of the novel Grant seems to have changed his mind in regard to religion. He asks himself "do you believe, Jefferson? Have I done anything to make you not believe? If I have please forgive me" (249). Moreover, he tells Paul that "you have to believe to be a teacher" (254). Grant does not necessarily believe at the end of the novel, nor does he consider himself an adequate teacher yet. However, his attitude towards religion has altered because of Jefferson. According to Folks, Grant's change of heart is the result of Jefferson's transformation. He argues that "Grant's earlier denial of religious belief was connected to his denial of the potential for 'heroism' in himself… [A]ny significant self-sacrifice in life, especially for one faced by an imminent death sentence, appears to require faith in an existence that continues after death" (262). This is why Grant tells Jefferson that he would never be able to be a hero himself; he does not have faith in a better place, or any place for that matter, after death. If death means an end to everything, rather than a station between life and what comes after, self-sacrifice becomes inconceivable. Grant realizes that by denying Jefferson solace, in the form of "lies", as he calls them in his argument with Reverend Ambrose, he has made dying and "taking the cross" for everyone inevitably harder for Jefferson. Moreover, Folks argues that "in the context of Southern rural society, to deny the afterlife is to undercut the very basis of responsibility that holds the community together and that binds individuals to the community, educating them to norms of behavior based on an acceptance of social responsibility" (262). Now that Grant comprehends the importance of religion for the community he is at least able to treat the concept of religion with more respect, despite his remaining uncertainty about the existence of God. He has also come to the realization that his harshness and the resentment he feels for his people are fed by a similar arrogance as his resentment for religion; by not believing in education and the people of the

parish, failure becomes unavoidably a self-fulfilling prophecy. The lesson for Grant is thus one in humility.

The lesson that Grant tries to teach Jefferson is one in humanity. Jefferson is on trial for planning a robbery on a liquor store with two other men, and murdering the shopkeeper in the process. The two actual robbers, Brother and Bear, are also killed in the shootout, which means that there are no witnesses left to support Jefferson's story. Jefferson's attorney uses a craniological argument to dehumanize Jefferson by means of defense. He says to the jury "look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand –look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence?" He calls Jefferson "a cornered animal" and a "hog". He claims that Jefferson's only ability is to "strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa" and adds that Jefferson is a "thing that strikes on command" (7). Jefferson's subaltern status is confirmed when he not allowed to speak. In accordance with Spivak's theory Brown argues that as a result of his attorney's plea "[Jefferson's] insignificance is collectively assumed by the system that condemns him to death. Much like the residents of the community who have come to witness the outcome of the trial, he is a quiet observer and does not speak for himself. He is not permitted to speak on his own behalf once he has been pronounced guilty" (26). Jefferson is dehumanized during the trial, and in addition to this he also loses his means of autonomy because he is not allowed to speak; he is forced to be a bystander while he is convicted for murder and receives the death penalty. As a result he adopts animal-like behaviour; he becomes the hog his attorney makes him out to be. Jefferson's behaviour can be seen as an extreme case of double consciousness; he adopts the inferior and dehumanized status that the white man has put upon him and internalizes the nature of the hog.

Jefferson has internalized the white view of blacks as less than human. In other words, like the old men in *A Gathering* he is affected with double consciousness. He has adopted the

image of himself that whites, in this case his attorney, have forced upon him. When asked by Grant if he wants something to eat, Jefferson replies "'[t]hat's for youmans…. I'm an old hog'" (83). Moreover he is determined to behave like a hog until the end of his life. An important difference between Jefferson and, for instance, the old men in *A Gathering*, is that Jefferson does not aspire to be a man, or overcome double consciousness. He consciously and consistently refuses Grant's help, help that is intended to stimulate him to reclaim his manhood and humanity. Jefferson has hardly had any education at all; he is only semi-literate and ever since he was very small he has had to work on the plantation. It is ironically only when he is condemned to death that Grant comes to his cell to teach him; Jefferson does not see the use in being educated while he feels that he is "a old hog they fattening up to kill" (83); he does not understand the use of education, now that he is close to his death, while it was denied him during his life. However, Jefferson does not necessarily refuse Grant's help because he prefers to behave as a hog, or out of resentment; he does so mainly because he has lost all possibility of self-determination. The only thing he is still able to control is his own behavior. Consequently, he considers Grant a threat to the only thing that he still has power over. In addition Jefferson feels that becoming a man is not going to help him; he will die anyway.

However, in a final attempt to help Jefferson, Grant explains to him that if he is unable to become a man for his own benefit, at least he can reclaim his humanity for others. Grant uses the word "hero" to define one who sets himself and his own wishes aside for the benefit of others. Grant asks, "'do you know what a hero is Jefferson? A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don't and can't do…He would do anything for the people he loves because he knows that it would make their lives better" (191). After Grant's lecture, Jefferson behaves differently; he agrees to eat some of his grandmother's gumbo when he is not hungry, for instance, only to please her. He decides to

become the hero that Grant encourages him to be. As a true hero, Jefferson is even given a mission by Grant; Jefferson needs to overcome the myth of black inferiority; he needs to lose his subaltern status. Grant tells him that

> "A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they are better than anyone else on earth…[T]he last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth. They would no longer have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in…I want you to chip away that myth by standing." (192)

Grants suggests that Jefferson can overcome this myth, and simultaneously his subaltern position by writing.

A few days before he is to be executed Grant gives Jefferson a notebook and asks him to write down his thoughts, thus providing him with a means to express himself. As Brown points out, "Gaines suggests that because Jefferson internalizes white racism without having an external venue… he also relinquishes an exterior display of masculinity and accepts, instead, labels assigned him" (24). Thus, by means of self-expression in an external venue, namely writing, Jefferson can counter the internalization of the "hog" label that was assigned to him by his attorney. Even though Jefferson can only write a little he manages to put down his feelings in his diary. As such, despite being subaltern, Jefferson learns to speak. This might seem contradictory to Spivak's conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak. However, as Spivak explains in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", it is impossible for the subaltern to speak, not because the subaltern cannot produce literal words, but because there are no means for the subaltern to speak. The means available are Western; they would be a borrowed voice for the subaltern to speak through. These means could not truly be used for a representation of the subaltern, because they are not *of* the subaltern; the language of the oppressor is used to

subjugate the subaltern (88–90). Jefferson, however, does not simply employ the language of his oppressors to express himself; rather, he uses his own version of that language: “mr wigin you say rite somethin but i dont kno what to rite you say i must be thinkin bout things i aint telin nobody and i order put it on paper” (226). By using a language he constructs himself, Jefferson is able to speak for himself.

Conclusion

Ernest J. Gaines's novels stage the successful struggle of African American men to overcome white oppression despite being consistently and systematically undermined and sabotaged by whites who wish to maintain the status quo of their supremacy. The men in Gaines's novels manage to surmount white oppression by sacrifice, resistance and agency. The men do not overcome white oppression as individuals or for their personal benefit. Rather, they contribute to the ability of the community as a whole to overcome white oppression. This does not mean that the men in Gaines's novels overcome no individual obstacles. It is necessary to make a distinction between the ability to break free from white supremacy and the ability to overcome the psychological condition of double consciousness. Throughout Gaines's novels the men manage to struggle and overcome double consciousness as an individual effort. Double consciousness is experienced by the individual, and can only be overcome on an individual level.

Overcoming double consciousness is a precondition for successful resistance. Double consciousness is a psychological response to racial oppression. White supremacy and oppression are inflicted by external forces on the African American community as a whole. Throughout Gaines's novels it is emphasized that white supremacy cannot be overcome by individuals; it is a communal effort. However, the individual is able to contribute to the community's ability to overcome white oppression by means of resistance and, if necessary, self-sacrifice. By displaying a willingness to die for a greater good, and in some cases by actually sacrificing his or her life, the individual is able to inspire the community. This is the case with Ned and Jimmy in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the old men in *A Gathering of Old Men*, and Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying*. The old men in *A Gathering* are slightly different from the other examples in that they inspire not only each other to stand

up against oppression, but also inspire the white people in their direct environment to reassess their role in the oppression of blacks: Candy and Gill.

As my analysis has shown, manhood in Gaines's novels in not necessarily a gender-based concept. In his novels Gaines redefines manhood as being willing to fight and even die for a goal. This applies not only (though mostly) to men: as Miss Jane Pittman demonstrates when she carries out Jimmy's last assignment after his death, it is not only men who are willing to fight and die for their ideals. Manhood stands for the more gender-neutral "humanhood" in Gaines's fiction; being a man thus means most of all to be human. In *A Lesson* Jefferson even literally becomes a man by overcoming his animal-like behavior. His gender is not important; more important is what separates humans from animals.

In addition, the ability to be a man is inseparably connected to the ability to overcome double consciousness. If there is an absence of manhood it can generally be reclaimed in the novels when double consciousness is overcome first. For the old men in *A Gathering*, for instance, manhood is regained when they feel that they have finally done what a man must do: when they have rejected the self-image that was forced upon them by white society. The same is true for Jefferson in *A Lesson*; he can only "reconstruct his concept of manhood" after he has "dismantle[d] white notions of black masculinity" (Brown 31). However, becoming a man is ultimately also linked closely to death. As Gaines himself has said, "whenever my men decide that they will be men regardless of how anyone else feels, they know that they will eventually die. But it is impossible for them to turn around" (O'Brien 30). More precisely; a willingness to die, and awareness of the possibility of dying for one's cause, are definite conditions for (re)claiming manhood. Thus, the term "manhood" implies above all to find courage in oneself to fight for a cause regardless of the consequences. As Gaines himself has said, "a man must do something, no matter what it is, he must do something and he must do that something well" (O'Brien 30). This is indeed reflected in all characters who come to

display or claim manhood, regardless of their actual gender: Ned, Jimmy, Miss Jane, the old men, Charlie, Mathu, and Jefferson.

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