

*African-American Literature*

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*Black Manhood in Ernest J.  
Gaines's Novels*

Eine Präsentation zum Inhalt und zum Schreibprozess  
meiner Bachelorarbeit  
im Rahmen des GraduMeetings 2016

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# *Outline*

- Bachelor Thesis
  - The Topic
  - The Author
  - The Novels
- Writing Process
  - Finding the Topic
  - Tools and Aids

# Quotes

- *„The major conflict in my work is when the black male attempts to go beyond the line that is drawn for him“ (In an interview in 1994)*
- *“I tried to decide just how I should respond to them. Whether I should act like the teacher that I was, or like the nigger that I was supposed to be.” (Lesson 47)*



# *The Topic – (Black) Manhood*

- Definition

- *“Qualities such as strength, courage, and especially sexual power, that people think a man should have” (Longman 873).*
- *„[manhood] depends heavily on one’s class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, region of the country (Kimmel 5)*

→ An analysis of black male characters in Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* and *A Gathering of Old Men*

# *The Author*

**Ernest James Gaines**

Born on January 15, 1933  
In Louisiana



<https://twitter.com/ernestjgaines>

# *The Author*

- prominent Southern author whose work focuses on themes such as place, race, equality, and gender in rural Louisiana
- his novels are influenced by his own childhood (growing up in Louisiana, school terms interfering with field work duty, racial issues, social injustice)
- apart from other southern writers (e.g. Faulkner), his biggest inspiration was his crippled aunt, „who did not walk a day in her life but who taught [him] the importance of standing“



# *The Novels*

- Published in 1993
- Setting:  
In the 1940s, on  
Pichot Plantation  
and in Bayonne,  
Louisiana

ERNEST J.  
GAINES



# A Lesson Before Dying

"This majestic,  
moving  
novel is an  
instant  
classic,  
a book that  
will be read,  
discussed  
and taught  
beyond  
the rest of  
our lives."  
—Chicago Tribune

# *A Lesson Before Dying*

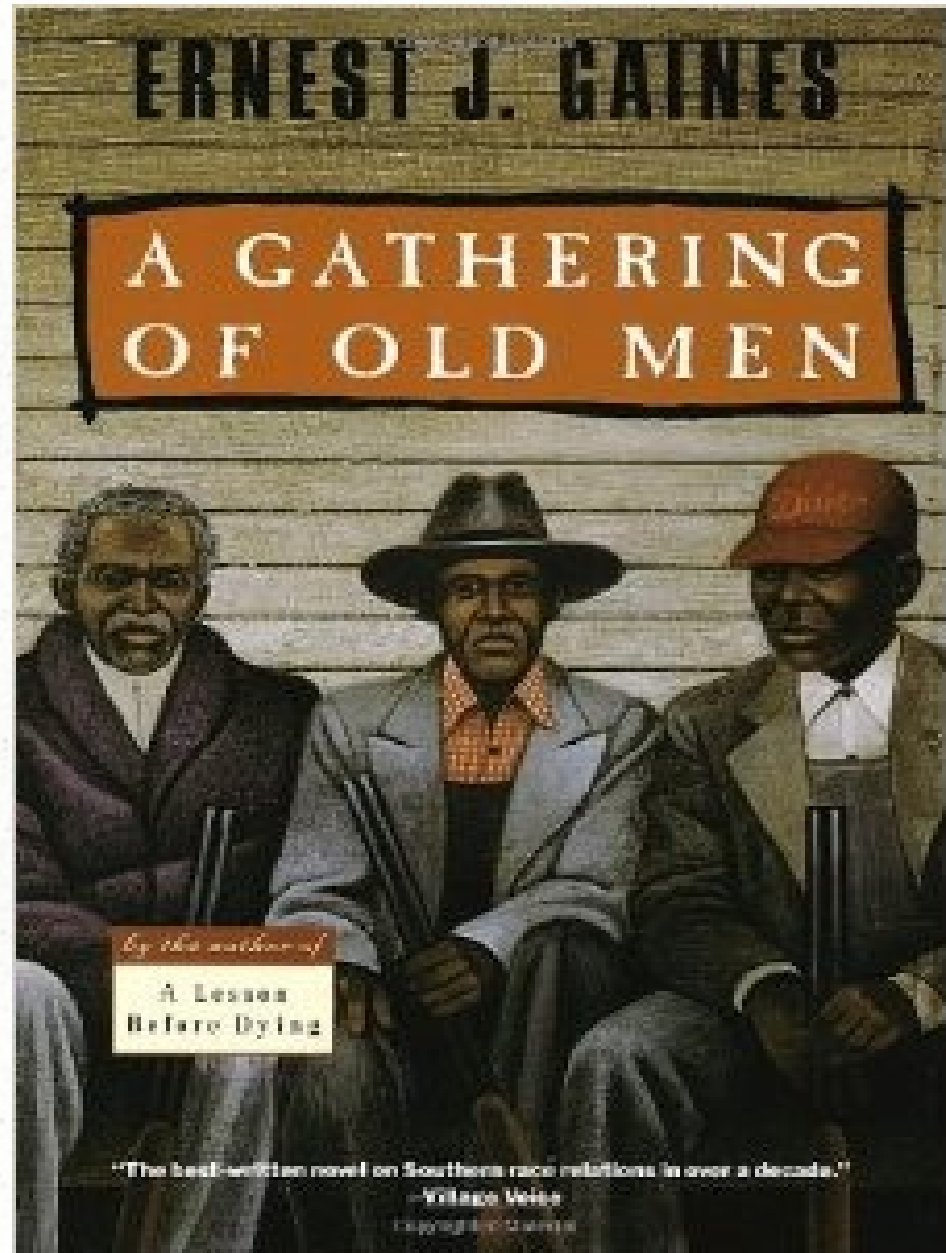
<b>Characters</b>	Grant Wiggins, his aunt Lou and his girlfriend Vivien Jefferson and his godmother Emma Local sheriffs White plantation owners School superintendent and personnel, school kids
<b>Conflict</b>	Jefferson is sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit
<b>Action</b>	Grant visits Jefferson regularly to teach him dignity before his death; Grant revisits his own situation
<b>Climax</b>	Grant gets through to Jefferson; Jefferson dies with dignity



	At the novel's outset	At the novel's end
Grant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although working as the plantation's teacher, he is constantly reminded of his social restrictions</li> <li>• Considers himself as “<u>running in place</u>” (<b>Lesson</b> 102)</li> <li>• Educational conditions inadequate, pupils are treated like slaves (“<u>excellent crop</u>”, <b>Lesson</b> 56)</li> <li>• Unable to accept, but also unable to escape humiliations, he considers his task as impossibility and finds out he does not have an answer (“<u>Do I know how a man is supposed to die? I’m still trying to find out how a man should live</u>”, <b>Lesson</b> 31)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In teaching Jefferson, Grant found something to dedicate his life to (“<u>I need someone to tell me what to do. I need you to tell me, to show me</u>”, <b>Lesson</b> 193)</li> <li>• When he understands the importance of the case, Grant gives up his ego-centrism and puts the community's well-being before his own (“<u>To them, you’re nothing but another nigger–no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong. You can do more than I can ever do</u>”, <b>Lesson</b> 190 / <u>Because we need you to be and want you to be. Me, your godmother, the children, and all the rest of them in the quarter</u>”, <b>Lesson</b> 193)</li> </ul>

	At the novel's outset	At the novel's end
Jefferson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A voiceless black teen, deprived of his very humanity (<u>"I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this"</u>, <b>Lesson 8</b>)</li> <li>• No self-respect, no education. He believes to be what the white men tell him; as a result, he is ignorant to Grant's lessons (<u>"That's how a old hog eat"</u>, <b>Lesson 83</b>)</li> <li>• Not used to emotions and affection, he can neither see, nor understand Miss Emma's pain</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When he accepts Grant as his "partner" (<b>Lesson 184</b>), he begins to understand the need to sacrifice his life in order to heal an entire race (<u>"I'm go'n do my best, Mr. Wiggins. That's all I can promise. My best"</u>, <b>Lesson 225</b>)</li> <li>• He gains self-value and agrees on writing down his thoughts in a diary (<u>"i cry cause you been so good to me mr wigin an nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im somebody"</u>, <b>Lesson 232</b>)</li> <li>• He becomes a man by refusing to act the way the white men expected him to (<u>"good by mr wigin tell them im strong tell them im a man"</u>, <b>Lesson 234</b>)</li> </ul>

- Published in 1983
- Setting: In the 1970s, on Marshall Plantation and in Bayonne, Louisiana



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# *A Gathering of Old Men*

<b>Characters</b>	The Marshalls (Plantation owners) The Cajun Boutan Family Black plantation residents Local sheriffs
<b>Conflict</b>	The Cajun farmer Beau Boutan has been shot dead in the yard of Mathu, a respected black resident
<b>Action</b>	Plantation men gather at Mathu's place to express solidarity and resistance
<b>Climax</b>	The murderer's confession and a shootout between blacks and whites

	At the novel's outset	At the novel's end
<b>Mathu</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly respected by plantation people, both black and white. The role model among black people (<u>"He's a better man than most I've met, black or white"</u>, <b><i>Gathering</i></b> 74)</li> <li>• Resistant to any form of physical or verbal discrimination (<u>"Mathu was the only one we knowed had ever stood up"</u>, <b><i>Gathering</i></b> 31)</li> <li>• Disrespectful to his fellow black men (<u>"He looked down on all the rest of us"</u>, <b><i>Gathering</i></b> 51)</li> <li>• A father figure for Candy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mathu creates a sense of belonging to the gathered men (<u>"Till a few minutes ago, I felt the same way that men out there feel about y'all—you never would 'mount to anything"</u>, <b><i>Gathering</i></b> 181)</li> <li>• He is proud and respectful (<u>"And I look up to you. Every man in here. And this the proudest day of my life"</u>, <b><i>Gathering</i></b> 181)</li> <li>• Mathu parts from Candy's conditional affection (<u>"He told her no; he told her Clatoo was there in the truck, and he would go back with Clatoo and the rest of the people"</u>, <b><i>Gathering</i></b> 214)</li> </ul>

	At the novel's outset	At the novel's end
<b>Charlie</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Merely appearing in the background, no remarkable character</li> <li>• An irresponsible coward (<u>"I told Parrain I was scared. I told him I was go'n run and try to reach the North. . . . I told him he had to say he did it, 'cause they didn't put people old as him in the 'lectric chair"</u> (<i>Gathering</i> 192)</li> <li>• Expresses his weakness in an attempt of suicide (<u>"got a handful of dirt and stuffed in my mouth, trying to kill myself"</u>, <i>Gathering</i> 192)</li> <li>• Accepted verbal and physical violence all his life (<u>"'bused me if I did it right, and 'bused me if I did it wrong—all my life. And I took it"</u>, <i>Gathering</i> 188)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He turns out to be the embodiment of the old men's gathering (<u>"Don't be never scared no more . . . Life's so sweet when you know you ain't no more coward"</u>, <i>Gathering</i> 208)</li> <li>• He understands his own humane status as a man and overcomes years of racist injustice (<u>"I told him no, I wasn't go'n 'low that no more, 'cause I was fifty years old—half a hundred"</u>, <i>Gathering</i> 190)</li> <li>• He claims his manhood in an act of active resistance and this becomes the new role model for the old men (<u>". . . hoping some of that stuff he had found back there in the swamps might rub off"</u>, <i>Gathering</i> 210)</li> </ul>



# *Results*

- The struggle for manhood of Ernest Gaines's characters is not restricted to age or profession
- “[...] the entire community must learn the lesson that all Gaines's protagonists struggle to learn: that no one is anyone's 'hog', that 'manhood' is really strong and sensitive humanity, which includes perceptive and reactive comprehension of others' acts and feelings, and the moral and relational values that enable one to learn and love, make commitments, and survive as an integral personality whoever one is, regardless of external circumstances or even impending loss of life.”  
(Doyle 207)

# *Writing Process*

- Finding the topic
  - Decision: Language, Literature or Culture?
  - Which topics arouse your interest?
- In my case:

*“When it's a white man's word against a black man's,*

*the white man always wins.”*



# *Preparations*

- Consultation!!
  - Contact your professor, tell him/her about your interests, take their advice
  - If possible, contact people who are experts on the subject you are working on
- (A LOT OF!!!) Reading
- Filter out the most interesting topics



# *Writings Process: Tools and Aids*

- Jstor / Citavi / Bibme.org
- Niederhauser, Jürg (2006): Die schriftliche Arbeit – kurz gefasst.
  - **keep in mind:** write down sources of every note that you make; make sure to examine online sources narrowly according to their reliability

## *Sources / Works Cited*

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<http://www.achievement.org/achievers/gai0/large/gai0-006.jpg>