Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 300

Volume 300

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction,* edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Contents

Ernest J. Gaines
1933-

(Full name Ernest James Gaines) American novelist, short story writer, and essayist.

The following entry presents an overview of Gaines's career through 2009. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC,* Volumes 3, 11, 18, and 181. For information on the novel *A Lesson before Dying* (1993), see *CLC,* Volume 86.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most prominent African American authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Gaines is best known for his novels and short stories that depict plantation life in the post-slavery South. His novels—notably *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), and *A Lesson before Dying* (1993)—portray the dehumanizing effects of entrenched racism on individual relationships as well as on the community. Deeply embedded in the African American culture, history, and the folk traditions of rural Louisiana, Gaines's works chart the experiences of black men and women as they negotiate their past and their present on their way to personal growth and social equality.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The son of Manuel and Adrienne Gaines, Gaines was born on the River Lake Plantation near Oscar, Louisiana, where his parents worked as sharecroppers and he himself labored from the age of nine. While their parents worked in the fields, Ernest and his twelve younger siblings were raised by their aunt, Augusteen Jefferson, a severely handicapped woman who provided the model for the many strong, self-sacrificing, religious, older women who appear in Gaines's writings. His childhood experiences of field work, fishing in the swamps, and overhearing his aunt's conversations with her friends provided the basis for many of Gaines later works. After Gaines's parents separated in 1941, he lost touch with his father, who served in World War II and later relocated to New Orleans. Gaines's mother remarried and moved to Vallejo, California, with her new husband, and Gaines joined them in there in 1948. He began attending high school for the first time, developed a passion for reading, and then enrolled at Vallejo Junior College before enlisting in the U.S. Army. Gaines served during the Korean War and when his tour of duty ended in 1955, he enrolled at San Francisco State College. He had started writing in the meantime and in 1956 he published his first short story in the magazine *Transfer.* After receiving a bachelor's degree on 1957, Gaines received a Wallace Stegner fellowship and entered the graduate program in creative writing at Stanford University the following year. He won the Joseph Henry Jackson award for one of his short stories in 1959 and subsequently withdrew from Stanford to devote himself to writing full time. Gaines's first novel, *Catherine Carmier,* was published in 1964, but he did not gain widespread critical recognition until the publication of his third novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* seven years later. He became a professor of English at the University of Southern Louisiana in 1983. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Gathering of Old Men* each received the California Book Award from the Commonwealth Club of California, and in 1987 Gaines won an Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *A Lesson Before Dying* received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. In 2000 Gaines was awarded the National Humanities Medal by the National Endowment for the Humanities and in 2004 he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

MAJOR WORKS

Primarily set in the imaginary locale of Bayonne, Louisiana, Gaines's fiction offers a unique African American perspective on the culture of the rural South and its diverse community that encompasses blacks, whites, Creoles, and Cajuns. Gaines's first novel, *Catherine Carmier,* depicts the love affair between Jackson Bradley, an educated black man who has returned to Bayonne, and Catherine, the daughter of a bigoted sharecropper who does not allow his family to mix with anyone except other whites. Their personal struggle reflects and illuminates issues involving family, community, and morality at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, in which period the novel is set. In a similar vein, *Of Love and Dust* (1967) chronicles the culturally forbidden relationship

between Marcus Payne, a hostile young black man lately out of prison, and a white woman, Louise Bonbon, the wife of Sidney, the Cajun manager of the plantation on which Marcus works. Marcus and Louise fall in love and plan to run away together, but Marcus is killed by the novel's conclusion by Sidney, and Louise goes mad.

The short stories in Gaines's collection *Bloodline* (1968) demonstrate his skillful use of structure and first-person narration, and their portrait of the tightly-knit community around Bayonne has evoked comparison with works of William Faulkner and James Joyce. Set in the early days of the Civil Rights movement, the stories are unified by the maturation of each respective narrator or protagonist, by the fact that all the action takes place in a single day in Bayonne, by Gaines's use of the dialect of rural African Americans, and by the stories' shared focus on family relationships. In "A Long Day in November," the first and longest story in the volume, six-year-old Sonny relates a conflict between his parents and its amorous resolution; in "The Sky Is Gray," an eight-year old boy accompanies his mother on a trip to the dentist, travelling from their rural black community to the dentist's mostly white one. In "Three Men," Procter Lewis, jailed for stabbing another black man, ends up in jail, but his experiences there make him vow to break the cycle of violence that perpetuates the problems of black men in a white world. "Bloodline" tells the story of Copper Laurent, a returning veteran who wants to claim his birthright as the only surviving descendent of a white plantation owner, but who is thwarted in his efforts by his dying white uncle. The last story in the collection, "Just Like a Tree," told from multiple points of view, concerns Aunt Fe, the beloved black matriarch of the Duvall plantation. While her niece wants to move her to a safer place as civil rights activities start up, the old woman refuses to go and eventually dies on the plantation, on her own terms and with dignity.

Considered by many critics to be Gaines's best work, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* chronicles the history of blacks in the United States from the Civil War, through the era of Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement as narrated by the one-hundred-eight-year-old title character. Framed as a taped and edited interview between Miss Jane and a history teacher, the narrative ranges over Miss Jane's escape (and forced return) from her plantation, her struggle to attain human rights, her defiance of white society's dictates, and her wait for a leader who will lead blacks to freedom. Her wit and folk wisdom make her struggles and her journey from childhood to extreme old age emotionally compelling as she realizes that freedom is not bestowed from outside, but rather comes from within the community. By contrast, *In My Father's House* (1978) is set in urban Baton Rouge and concerns the conflict between Philip Martin, a prominent civil rights leader and the illegitimate son he refuses to acknowledge. Though the son, Robert, originally sets out to kill his father, the novel does not end in violence, but in a confrontation between the two men that finally forces Philip to come to terms with the consequences of having abandoned his family.

Structured as a detective story that is narrated by seventeen different characters, *A Gathering of Old Men* depicts a group of elderly black men who together decide to defy past injustice by individually claiming responsibility for the murder of a member of a violent Cajun clan. When the police assign the crime to one of the men, all the others step in with confessions, which make up the body of the novel and display their accumulated rage at the hands of decades-long mistreatment by the local whites and Cajuns. *A Lesson Before Dying,* set in 1948, focuses on the interaction between Jefferson, a young, barely-literate black man sentenced to death, and Grant Wiggins, a disillusioned rural teacher; their relationship transforms each man and teaches each a lesson about human dignity. Gaines's most recent collection of stories and essays, *Mozart and Leadbelly* (2005), includes pieces about his approach to writing as well as previously uncollected stories, all of which but one predate *Bloodline.* Several of the stories focus of sexual initiations and father-son relationships, one is a precursor of the novel *Catherine Carmier,* and "Christ Walked down Market Street"—Gaines's only story set outside Louisiana—concerns a man who was once accosted by a homeless beggar whom he later recognizes as Jesus Christ. Later old and alcoholic, he spends his days trying to find Jesus again.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have long recognized Gaines for his incisive and compelling portrayals of the lives and struggles of African American individuals and communities in rural Louisiana via his invention and development of the fictional locale of Bayonne. Reviewers praise him for his skill in capturing the dialect, personalities, and folk culture of his subjects in his novels and stories, and for his ability to highlight the universal nature of his characters' journeys and their desire for dignity and equality. While tradition and history play a major part in Gaines's work, he also affirms his interest in contemporary issues in his pieces that deal with social justice, notions of manhood, and male-female relations in the rural South. Over the years, critics have delved

more specifically into Gaines's style—for example, David Madden discusses Gaines's handling of what the critic calls the "charged image" in two of his works, "Just Like a Tree" and *A Gathering of Old Men,* emphasizing the power of a well-chosen image in each work to carry its themes. In fact, Madden calls the tree in "Just Like a Tree" "the most powerful example among African American southern short stories of a charged image." Raphaël Lambert has studied the role of orality and linguistic musicality in the speech patterns of Gaines's characters, commenting on how these contribute to narrative structure and thematic development. Claudine Raynaud focuses on the implications of the three points of view—Miss Jane's, the fictional editor's, and the author's—for the meaning of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as a fictional autobiography. In their interview with Gaines, Marcia Gaudet and Darrell Bourque invite Gaines to comment on the influence of visual art and especially music in his work; Reggie Scott Young, in a discussion of the influence (or lack of it) of the works of earlier African American writers on later ones, also picks up on the theme of music, arguing that a genuine familiarity with it constitutes another form of cultural influence in the works of such writers as Gaines. But the concerns of the rural southern African American community and black-white relations in the south remain the most prominent topics for scholarly exploration in Gaines's works. Gaines himself confirms and expands on his ties to "the Louisiana thing" in an interview with Rose Anne Brister. Keith Byerman identifies the key role that an artist-intellectual like Grant Wiggins (in *A Lesson Before Dying*) can play in the possible future of the black community, as Gaines suggests. Trudier Harris approaches the values of the black community in terms of how they inform images of manhood, centering on Gaines's character of Procter Lewis. Brannon Costello analyzes the complex system of race, class, and generational conflict in *Of Love and Dust,* pointing out Gaines's insistence that "interracial and cross-class alliances must be grounded in the particular tradition and culture of the geographical area in which they take place if they are to succeed." Ed Piacentino examines black-white relations in *A Lesson Before Dying,* focusing on the character of Grant Wiggins who, he writes, "represents the possibility for eventual change and for racial harmony in the segregated South."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Catherine Carmier (novel) 1964
Of Love and Dust (novel) 1967
Bloodline (short stories) 1968
The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (novel) 1971
A Long Day in November (short stories) 1971
In My Father's House (novel) 1978
A Gathering of Old Men (novel) 1983
Porch Talk with Ernest Gaines: Conversations on the Writer's Craft [with Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooton] (interviews) 1990
A Lesson Before Dying (novel) 1993
Mozart and Leadbelly (short stories and essays) 2005

CRITICISM

Ernest J. Gaines and Rose Anne Brister (interview dates 27 November and 11 December 2001)

SOURCE: Gaines, Ernest J., and Rose Anne Brister. "The Last Regionalist? An Interview with Ernest J. Gaines." *Callaloo* 26, no. 3 (summer 2003): 549-64.

[*In the following interviews, which took place in November and December of 2001, Gaines discusses his regional and emotional ties to Louisiana, comments on his overall career, and considers his place in contemporary American literature.*]

Although Ernest Gaines laughingly referred to himself as an "old relic" in this interview, he still possesses confidence in his writing and a demeanor indicative of a long and prosperous literary career. Gaines enjoys a personal and professional poise accrued over the last four decades that I observed as I interviewed him on two occasions: in person on November 27, 2001, at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and via the telephone on December 11, 2001. We visited familiar themes in his fiction and discussed his current projects, literary and otherwise. Also, he exhibited a willingness to explore the present state of southern literature and to contemplate its future state. Gaines's textual concerns, such as a sense of place and community, are an endangered species in contemporary literature. Just as these "pet themes" recur in his texts, similar themes recur throughout interviews he has given and in criticism about those texts. If Gaines himself does not adopt contemporary literary concerns, likewise many interviewers have deferred discussion regarding his position in the contemporary literary environment and his recapitulation of, by his admission, ideals not valued in today's culture. To this end, I presented several excerpts from previous interviews for his analysis in order to encourage him to evaluate his career retrospectively. I found that, while he does not consider criticism about his texts nor does he read

much contemporary fiction, Gaines continually exorcises the "Louisiana thing" that drives his fiction. But, even in light of this possible obstacle and his warning that he "said some stupid things in the past," I observed an introspective and retrospective Gaines, willing to review his distinguished career, to analyze his position in the current literary world, and to anticipate his future work.

[*Brister*]: *I have researched the southern pastoral and a sense of place in your writing. I focused on your use of imagery, location, and the extent to which the pastoral is manifested in* **Catherine Carmier** *and* **Of Love and Dust.** *I want to ask you some questions regarding a sense of place, and also I want to talk about your craft and teaching.*

[Gaines]: What do you mean by pastoral?

Well, valuing the rural space over the urban, the simple over the complex. In my research, I read many of your interviews and much criticism on the two novels. I want to ask you about a few statements you have made in the past and see if you still feel the same way now. A lot of these are older quotes and . . .

[*laughs*] Well, I said some stupid things in the past.

*[*laughs*] You did? To begin, I am interested in your relationship to the land, given that you went into the fields at age eight. In 1976, when you were living in San Francisco, you said, "I come back to the land to absorb things." Since home is now only one hour away, how often do you go back?*

I was there just yesterday because my wife and I recently bought a piece of that property. A few acres on the plantation where I grew up, where my mother grew up, where my grandparents grew up, where my folks probably had been slaves. We also have a camp down on the river in the area that I write about. It's Point Coupee, which I call St. Raphael Parish. New Roads is Bayonne. The river is the St. Charles River because I named it after my brother, and Raphael is my stepfather who raised me. I sort of name things after them. Yes, I am very closely related to the land because, until I left from here, that's about all I knew. That's where my family had been for many, many, many generations. You could probably go back to slavery, and they were there. So the land is very important to me and to my work and to all the things I write about. It is one of the main characters in my work.

In 1990, you told Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooton, "There is no future for blacks on this place at all . . ." You were referencing the area in and around River Lake plantation. What is the future now for River Lake?

I'm the only one who has bought a piece of that property. I don't think they'll sell it to anyone else. I guess because of my name, I suppose, and teaching here [University of Louisiana at Lafayette] and because we've had a relationship with the owners of the property. We don't call it a plantation anymore, just formerly River Lake plantation. They know who we are. So many people own parts of this place, sixteen or more. The people who sold it were not spending any amount of time there anymore. They just put it up for sale. We saw the sign, and, without knowing who they were, we called. It just so happened that we knew the people. We got together and bought the piece of land.

What are your plans for this land?

We are planning to put a house there. I live a block from here (ULL); it's a university house. It's called the "Gaines House." They might as well put a plaque up there now. [*laughs*] My wife feels that it's better to have something out there on the land where my ancestors were, to have a "Gaines House" out there. So we intend to put a house there within the next year or so.

Is it true that you are involved with the local community to save the buildings at Cherie Quarters?

I am not involved specifically with those buildings. I've been involved in saving the cemetery, which we have done. My wife, another friend, and I have established a nonprofit cemetery corporation which now owns the graveyard. We pay for the cleaning and the upkeep of the cemetery. We want people who have relatives buried there to come in and contribute. Once a year, All Saints Day, we organize a day to clean up the tombs, paint the tombs, cut the grass, get the weeds out of the tombs, plant flowers. Every month we send someone out there to cut the grass. We do that on our own. There are only about two old shacks remaining in the quarters, and I have no input there at all. Only the cemetery. There's a church there; the same church where I attended school. We're also interested in moving that particular building onto our property as well and restoring it.

Do you think that's feasible? Are you in talks with the owners of that land?

We've already discussed it, and it's okay.

Perhaps due to my upbringing, it's my impression that, even in the late 20th and 21st century, a native Louisianian usually doesn't leave home, or, if he or she leaves home, will come back quite often. Does Louisiana cast a spell over its children?

Well, not all of its children. I'm the oldest of my siblings, and there are twelve. Seven of us were born here; five in California. Besides myself, there's only

one other brother who would like to come back and stay here. He's talking about coming back within the next few years or so. The others have forgotten about it altogether. They have good jobs and nice homes, so they have no plans to come back to Louisiana. My ties are here because of my writing. I was taken away when I was fifteen years old. I had to be taken away because I could not go to high school here. I couldn't go to the library, and my folks wanted me to be educated. Because of segregation, there was no high school or library for blacks. I didn't want to leave, leave my aunt who raised me. Something of me just stayed here. I was always coming back to Louisiana.

Then, finally, when USL made me a professor in 1981, I stayed here but not permanently, because I was only here during the semester when I was teaching. The rest of the time I was in San Francisco. But, since 1997, I have lived here and in Miami. I was always coming back here. I have done all of my writing in San Francisco. But the only place I could write about was Louisiana.

Do you feel that you can only physically do the writing when in San Francisco?

I really don't know. I've done some work here on what I hope turns out to be a novel, but I think it's about the fourth or fifth thing I've tried to do since ***A Lesson Before Dying*** and I just hope that this does turn out to be a novel. Of course, I'm writing it here because I'm no longer living in San Francisco. I visit San Francisco. As a matter of fact, my wife and I are going to San Francisco for New Year's. My mother's out there. My brothers and sisters are there. So, we go back and forth.

You have anticipated my next question. You told Marcia Gaudet in 1985 that if you had gained access to Wright's Native Son, *you would not have been influenced by it because it deals with the urban space. In your childhood, you remained in and around Pointe Coupee Parish, in the rural space. Did your confinement to the rural encourage a strong sense of place in your writing?*

Oh, right. Definitely so. If I had lived in a city—New Orleans, for example—I could not have written about this part of the state. Yes, I was confined to the area; it was part of my everyday life. I suppose that's why it is so involved in my work, because I didn't know anything else as a child. A lot of the things that I recall in my work are from my childhood. Faulkner did all of this with his Yoknapatawpha County around Oxford, Mississippi. He concentrates all of his work in and around the town of Oxford. I thought if Faulkner can do this with Mississippi, then I can do that with Louisiana. So I concentrate all of my work in one area. I don't know if that has been limiting or not. I've spent most of my life in San Francisco, and I have often thought about writing other novels about San Francisco, about my army experience. But nothing really came off. I think the body was in those places but the soul was not. Whenever I try to write these things [novels about San Francisco], they just don't come out very well. So I discard the work and go back to my Louisiana. I suppose had I written about those areas I could have written four or five more novels, maybe short stories. I would save all my energy just to go back to the Louisiana thing.

You wrote three California novels early in your career and called them "bad." What exactly makes them "bad"?

They're bad because there's no soul in them. I think the three manuscripts are in the Dupre Library, drafts of these things. I call them "things" because they surely were not very good. [*laughs*] I have one about my bohemian experience in San Francisco, one about my army experience, one about something else.

How has living in San Francisco influenced your writing? Has it facilitated your writing?

When I lived in San Francisco from the 1950s through the 1980s, I communicated with writers. I attended creative writing classes at San Francisco State and at Stanford. I never could have had that kind of exposure in Louisiana at that time. Maybe now I could do those things, but back in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, I never would have been able to get that exposure. Young writers should communicate with other writers, better writers, more mature writers. I really think San Francisco was a great place for any young artist in the 1950s and 1960s, especially the 1950s and 1960s with the Beat Generation. I was not caught up in it, but I was part of it. I stood outside of things. When I wanted to talk to people, I was at the university. There were always writers autographing their novels. So I thought it was quite healthy for a young writer at the time. For me, it was.

A good situation to observe, but not necessarily participate in?

Well, I participated in some of it. For example, I was at Stanford with Ken Kesey. He was sort of the guru of the drug scene and that sort of thing. We were in class together, so we would get together. But I would never participate in the drug scene. I'd be around and watch these things. But I'd never get involved in it, because I could see that it could mess with your mind.

Do you know of any modern day equivalent of that creative atmosphere? Or has that atmosphere declined with the increase of technology?