

A Gathering of Old Men Study Guide

A Gathering of Old Men by Ernest Gaines

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

A Gathering of Old Men Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-2.....	5
Chapters 3-4.....	7
Chapters 5-6.....	9
Chapters 7-8.....	11
Chapters 9-10.....	13
Chapters 11-12.....	15
Chapters 13-14.....	16
Chapters 15-16.....	18
Chapters 17-18.....	19
Chapters 19-20.....	20
Characters.....	21
Objects/Places.....	27
Themes.....	29
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	32
Topics for Discussion.....	33



Plot Summary

Set in Louisiana, the story of *A Gathering of Old Men* opens up after the recent murder of the Marshall Plantation's boss, Beau Boutan. Candy Marshall, the plantation's part owner and overseer, discovers his body. Having found the remains outside the residence of her virtual foster father Mathu, Candy suspects that the black man may have played a role in Boutan's untimely demise, but she is nonetheless bound by loyalty to protect him from harm. Candy proceeds to gather everyone on the plantation, and when another local plantation resident, Miss Merle, arrives, Candy takes responsibility for the murder. Miss Merle is not convinced by Candy's confession but decides to help her in the effort to protect Mathu. Candy then implements a plan designed to confuse the Sheriff that involves bringing local men to the Mathu's house with shotguns and empty shells. She believes that so many possible suspects will render the crime unsolvable. Miss Merle helps spread the word and within hours, a dozen and a half men, all well into their seventies and eighties, arrive at the house with arms, set to play a part in the plan.

Although the Sheriff's arrival is one of great anticipation, most of the plantation's people are equally, if not more, anxious about the coming of a Cajun named Fix, a local known for his role as the leader of many past lynch mobs against blacks. His arrival seems inevitable considering that his son was the man who was murdered; the hunt for revenge will understandably be his main objective. Prior to his appearance, however, Sheriff Mapes and Lou Dimes, Candy's boyfriend, arrive. After discovering the identity of the slain man, the Sheriff sends his deputy to locate and detain Fix in order to prevent him from building a lynch mob to retaliate against the plantation. Once again, Candy attempts to draw blame for the crime, but the Sheriff dismisses her, instead questioning the group of men who have gathered at the scene of the crime.

The first men to confess to the crime are Gable and Billy Washington, who both earn the wrath of Sheriff Mapes when their responses prove unsatisfactory. After a similar show of displeasure and force brings down the Reverend Jameson, the remaining men shock the Sheriff by maintaining their resolve to confess to the crime; even lining up so as to better receive their own respective physical attacks. After halting his interrogation and ruling out the involvement of the missing man named Charlie, the worker closest to Beau, Sheriff Mapes deduces that Mathu must be the murderer, as he is the only solitary black man with the demonstrated ability to stand against local whites.

Although Sheriff Mapes is convinced that Mathu is the murderer, an arrest cannot be made with the numerous other confessions in play. The men continue to provide their own reasons for murdering Beau, each motivated by the desire to gain retribution for the atrocities committed against them. Having effectively hit a dead end in the investigation, the Sheriff and everyone present are forced to sit and wait for the impending arrival of Fix Boutan and his lynch mob.

The news of Beau's death reaches the ears of his brother Gil, a star player for Louisiana State University's football team. Due to Gil's anger over the killing, Cal, a black



teammate of Gil's who has been instrumental to his success, is now shunned by his white friend: the second half of the media-dubbed football power duo known as "Salt and Pepper." The situation at the plantation serves to further lower Gil's spirits, and he eventually makes his way back home, where his father Fix is waiting with others. Despite the resentment growing in the house among Fix and his blood-thirsty friends and associates, Gil refuses to participate in any plans to promote violence, as he dreams of being selected as an All-American for his football accomplishments. He insists that lynching should be a thing of the past. Without the support of all of his sons, Fix reluctantly abandons his plot for revenge and remains home. A local by the name of Luke Will does not accept this unwillingness to act and raises his own group to carry out the planned lynching. The group decides to make a stop at bar before they carry out their aims.

Once word reaches the plantation that Fix has backed down, Mathu agrees to cooperate and peacefully go with Sheriff Mapes to the jailhouse. Charlie returns before they depart and confesses that he murdered Beau because the man had threatened him. Charlie admits to having asked Mathu to take the fall for him while he tried to escape. After hiding in the swamps all day, Charlie claims he felt compelled as a man to return and take responsibility for the crime he committed.

Before the Sheriff can take Charlie to jail, Luke Will and his group appear and make a demand for Charlie's life. After Sheriff Mapes refuses to comply, Luke Will puts a bullet in the Sheriff's arm. The wounded officer remains down in the front of the house while a shootout ensues between the old men and the white mob. Luke Will and Charlie engage in a firefight, and Charlie eventually shoots Luke Will before he himself is gunned down. After his death, members of the community pay tribute to Charlie by touching his body.

The week following the shootout, a trial is held for everyone involved in the incident, and all are given five years of probation. Mathu and friends ride off at the close of the trial, while Candy and Lou, locked hand in hand, remain on the steps of the courthouse to close out the novel.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1: The first chapter is told from the perspective of George Eliot, Jr., aka Snookum. His grandmother Aunt Glo is summoned by Candy, who soon calls him, visibly upset, to inform Rufe, Corrine, and Reverend Jameson that they are needed at Mathu's house. She also sends him to tell Janey to call Miss Merle and Lou.

While on his errand, he discovers an abandoned but still-running tractor as well as the body of Beau Boutan, lying near Mathu's house. Snookum tells Mathu about his mission to gather everyone and is told by the man to stay away from the body. Snookum delivers his first three messages. When he finally calls for Janey at the main house, he is scolded by her for being too loud and not using proper honorifics to address Lou and Merle. Snookum informs Janey about the situation, and after recalling a sound she thought was gunfire, Janey expresses her concern over what Fix will do when he finds out about Beau's death. Snookum requests cakes as payment for delivering all of the messages, but is sent home empty-handed.

Chapter 2: Janice Robinson (aka Janey) is the narrator of Chapter 2. Extremely upset about recent developments, Janey tries to contact Lou and Miss Merle. She fails, but leaves a message for Lou to come to the plantation. Walking outside, she observes the drunk Major sleeping on the porch and Miss Bea searching for pecans. In fear of being held responsible, Janey hopes that the woman doesn't get bitten by a snake coming out of the weeds.

Janey makes two more failed attempts to call Miss Merle, all the while fearing the arrival of Fix and his mob. Miss Merle arrives unexpectedly and notices that Janey has been crying. Janey informs her of the situation regarding Beau. Distressed and unable to wake the Major, Merle heads off to Mathu's house to see Candy; she asks Janey to offer up a prayer.

Analysis

Beginning with Snookum's opening errand, these first two chapters provide the layout of the Marshall Plantation, the primary setting of the novel. Divisions within the geographical area — the main house, the former slave quarters — reinforce the defined social hierarchy within the community. Even more so, the language used by the characters, such as Candy referring to the black woman, Glo, in the familiar "Aunt Glo" while Snookum is ordered to refer to whites in terms of "Mr." and "Miss," further shows the way in which the traditional roles established through slavery are still upheld to a significant degree.

The first two chapters also serve to set up the circumstances that will define the rest of the novel, from the discovery of Beau's body to foreshadowing the appearance of



characters like Mapes, Fix, and Lou. They provide the first glimpse into the subjective shifting narrative technique that will be used throughout the book. Just as the reader is left clueless as to the full import of the unfolding circumstances, Gaines chooses to open the novel from the point of view of characters who are just as peripheral to the true action as the reader. This gives an added sense of evolution and growth as the narrative becomes more rich and concentrated throughout the duration of the story.

Vocabulary

weeds, garry, switch, quarters, cane, plarines, whooping, drove, banister, yonder, racket



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3: Miss Merle (Myrtle Bouchard), the narrator of Chapter 3, arrives at the Marshall House with an apple pie for the Major. After Janey informs her of Beau's murder, Merle heads down to Mathu's house where she encounters Johnny Paul, Rufe, and Mathu with their shotguns. Everyone at the scene, including Candy, professes to be Beau's murderer. Merle dismisses any belief that Candy is involved, and when she is told of the plan to stifle the impending investigation by Sheriff Mapes, Merle sympathizes with Candy's determination to protect Mathu and agrees to help her cause.

Upon Merle's return to the main house, Bea orders Janey to serve them drinks. Merle initially refuses but is countered by Bea's assertion of dominance over the Marshall House. Bea applauds her niece Candy's efforts and condemns the Cajuns. When Merle reveals Candy's plan, Janey overreacts, which results in Merle slapping her. Bea then suggests that they enlist the aid of Clatoo, a man who has detested the Boutans ever since Fix's brother attempted to rape Clatoo's sister. She was sent to jail, where she went insane. Clatoo agrees to help, and the three carry on their respective duties as they try to initiate Candy's plan.

Chapter 4: Robert Louis Stevenson Banks, who is known by the nickname Chimley, is the narrator of Chapter 4. He and his friend Mat are fishing when a boy comes up to tell them that Clatoo needs them at Mathu's house; he needs their help with Candy's plan. The men consider the bold position that Mathu has always taken against whites like Fix and believe that this may be their last chance to stand up for themselves against those who have long oppressed them. Determined to help the cause, Chimley returns home, where he gets into an argument with his wife. He hands her the fish, telling her to have them ready to eat when he gets back. He then heads off to catch a ride with Clatoo.

Analysis

Miss Merle's narration serves a unifying function that pulls together and clarifies much of what has been alluded to in the earlier chapters. Her story shines added light on the social and racial tensions that exist between the characters. Merle's character voice reflects her social position as a white woman of means. Although she is different from Bea and the Major in her desire to help Candy and, consequently, Mathu, Merle is still very aware of her superior social status in comparison to both the blacks and lower class whites such as the Cajun Boutan family .

The recurring theme of redemption begins with Chimley's chapter and the old men who gather at Mathu's house to reclaim their manhood. Candy's call to action is recognized by Mat as a God-given chance to do something of worth and to stand bravely against the local whites who have been oppressing them for their entire lives. Mathu represents



a masculine strength that the other men admire, and they each want to emulate him by claiming responsibility for Beau's murder.

Stylistically, through the use of personal narration, the author grants power to the uneducated men that allows them to become the verbal architects of their own stories, much in the way that they are trying to take physical control of their lives by helping Mathu.

Vocabulary

darn, cropped, parish, pitch, bloodweeds, gallery, spunk, bawling, perches, sackalays, croker, gingham, armoire



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5: Matthew “Mat” Lincoln Brown, the narrator of Chapter 5, makes his way home and, after procuring a shotgun, calls Clatoo to secure a ride to Mathu’s house. Ella, his wife, forces him into an argument in which he eventually reveals the details of the situation and how he plans to participate in the plan to save Mathu. Ella is adamant that he not go, but Mat pleads an impassioned case, boosted by his need to address the years of hardship they have had to endure. Mat recalls the death of their son after he was refused treatment at the hospital due to his race. When Clatoo arrives, he joins the other men going to Mathu’s house. Like Chimley, Mat realizes that he is afraid, but at the same time, he is also proud to be finally taking action.

Chapter 6: Another passenger on the truck, Cherry, opens up Chapter 6. Cherry, whose full name is Grant Bello, takes note of the pride swelling within the group. The men stop near a field of sugar cane and proceed on foot. The fields that were once worked by Cherry and his slave ancestors are now being cleared by the Boutans, who have a lease on the land, and Cherry remarks that the scene resembles the destruction of an abandoned house.

The group arrives at the graveyard where Clatoo has instructed them to wait while he gathers more men. Each black family on the plantation possesses a small portion of the yard. Jacob Aguillard visits the grave of his sister, a mulatto girl killed by white men for having sex with both whites and blacks, and whose body was abandoned by her disgraced family. Cherry prays over his family plot. When Clatoo arrives with the others, the men fire off their guns so as to make them look as if they’ve been used. They then continue on to Mathu’s house.

Analysis

Mat’s argument with his wife again explores the theme of redefining and reclaiming manhood. Above and beyond the racial discrimination and suffering Mat and his family have had to endure, there emerges a domestic threat to his transformation from his own wife. He finds the strength to overcome this through his goal to help Mathu.

The arrival of the group to the sugar cane fields and the graveyard offers the opportunity to expose more of the history of the plantation. The fields, which are being cleared, along with the weeds and cane growing in other areas like the graveyard, symbolize the shift in the agricultural way of life on the plantation. The changes reveal how the Boutans and their tractors have brought the once thriving community of black workers to the brink of collapse. The graveyard becomes the focal point by which the hardships and pain of the past give clarity and purpose to the display of strength that they are now trying to show.

In contrast to previous chapters, where there is shown to be a division within the whites on an economic level, here there emerges the issue of division among the blacks based on skin tone, shown by the treatment of Jacob's mixed-race sister. This form of internal racism further demonstrates the absurdity of social classifications as an indicator of individual worth.

Vocabulary

mulatto, Cajun, peddling, plantation, straggled, bayou, albino, sharecropper, tramps

Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7: Clatoo, born Cyril Robillard, is the narrator of Chapter 7. Upon his arrival at Mathu's house, Candy tells Clatoo that she shot Beau, but of course, he doesn't believe her. Although Mathu makes it known that he plans to turn himself in, the others insist that they will take the blame. They even begin to compete with one another over who has the better story and motivation. Only Reverend Jameson abstains, insisting that the plan is foolish but also refusing to leave. Louis Alfred Dimoulin, aka "Lou Dimes") soon arrives.

Chapter 8: Lou comes to the plantation after receiving Candy's message. Everyone sticks to their respective stories about who shot Beau, and when Lou challenges Candy's involvement she becomes angry, insisting that she shot Beau, not only for striking Charlie but also for not heeding her warning to stay away from Mathu and his land. An enraged Candy tells Lou that he can take his concerns about her plans to deal with Fix back to Baton Rouge if he has a problem.

Sheriff Mapes arrives and takes control by having his deputy tend to Beau's body, the tractor, and the threat of Fix. Candy tries to confess, but Mapes dismisses her and directs his attention to the group of armed men, with Billy Washington being the first to be questioned. Billy and the man questioned after him, Gable, accept the blame and endure slaps from Mapes for their persistence. When Reverend Jameson is struck down for refusing to cooperate, the other men line up to receive similar punishment. This scene causes Mapes to redirect his focus to other suspects, and after ruling out Charlie, who has disappeared and is thus looked upon as a coward, Mathu becomes the prime candidate. Mapes also develops a lesser opinion of Lou for not having more control over his girlfriend Candy; allowing her to orchestrate the plot that is hindering his ability to make an arrest.

The coroner comes to collect Beau's body and leaves with instructions to be discreet about the death. When the old men refuse to clear the way for Mapes, Billy Washington reasserts his motivation for killing Beau with the tale of about his son, who was crippled by Beau and subsequently committed to a mental hospital. Mapes pushes Washington's story aside and calls for Mathu.

Analysis

Chapter 7 expands upon the theme of internal discrimination by showing Mathu as the plantation's dominant figure of black masculinity; he is not only the boldest of the men but is also free of any white lineage. Reverend Jameson's reluctance to be involved reveals that not everyone has the same pride or enthusiasm in being presented with the opportunity to help Mathu.



The entrance of Lou Dimes brings back the clear narrative voice that appeared earlier in Merle's narrative. It is more objective than some of the others, and serves to bring together the narrative threads. Lou also represents a depiction of the Southern man which is different from that shown through the other male characters, black or white. His approach to manhood is one that does not thrive on suppressing anyone or anything.

Mapes takes an entirely opposite approach, literally employing a heavy hand whenever possible to assert his authority, an ironic mark of weakness considering that no one can rightly challenge his protected position as an officer. In their own way, the other members at the scene manage to feed off of his aggression to boost their own morale. The uncustomary strength of the men confuses and frustrates Mapes's plans. This power shift is even more evident when Billy volunteers the details of his story without being asked by Mapes, a move that never would have been accepted in the past from a black person talking to a white person.

Vocabulary

nappy, pellets, bugger, hysterical, coagulated, brogans, lateral, sweatband, jowls, harboring, coroner, seersucker, exasperation, loony, impeccably



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9: Joseph “Rufe” Seabury assumes the narrative for Chapter 9, where he notes the respect that Mapes has for Mathu as a real man. Mapes accepts Mathu’s confession, but is unable to convince him to tell the others to leave. The men each continue to claim responsibility, although Mapes maintains their confessions are all lies. Johnny Paul, angry over the Sheriff’s dismissal of their pain, declares that Beau’s death is payment for the suffering of the men and their ancestors.

Tucker then questions the law’s upholding of justice as he offers the story of his brother Silas, the district’s last black sharecropper, who was beaten to death for winning a race with his mules against a Cajun and his tractor. Stories from Yank, describing the loss of his horses, and Gable, telling about the death of his son by electric chair for allegedly raping a white woman, get a rise out of Mapes’s deputy, Griffin, but the Sheriff silences him. Coot, a veteran, proceeds to tell several stories about the unfair treatment of black war heroes. Reverend Jameson is shunned by the group for insisting that Mapes do his duty and make some arrests. Mapes rejects Beulah’s offer to share her stories of the treatment of black women; He declares that, although everyone has a story to tell, none of them provide proof of Boutan’s involvement. After being mocked by the group, Mapes suggests that someone just go with him to jail, and Candy accepts the offer. Everyone then decides to wait for whatever trouble may be headed their way.

Chapter 10: Thomas Vincent “Sully” Sullivan (also referred to as “T.V.”), a third-string Irish quarterback, describes the rift which occurs between Cal “Pepper” Harrison and Gil “Salt” Boutan after Gil discovers that his brother has been murdered by a black person on the Marshall Plantation. The coldness between the once-close friends and football teammates threatens to affect Gil’s possible selection as an All-American. Leaving Cal at school, Sully and Gil make their way to the plantation where Gil finds that his brother’s body has already been removed and his father is being detained at home. Gil is angered by the apparent inaction of the local law enforcement officers and assumes that Candy’s plan is a boastful act of superiority on her part, and an attempt to further insult his family, which he believes has always been looked down on by the Marshalls. Emotionally broken, he attacks Candy’s character and leaves for home with Sully.

Analysis

At this point, emotions truly boil over in the novel, as the men stand up against the Sheriff by making him listen to their stories of suffering and injustice. Following Billy Washington’s example, the group makes a united stand, effectively shifting the power dynamic in their favor, a change most noticeable in the way that it angers Griffin. In essence, the men deliver a historical account of the black condition, reaching all the way back to slavery and up to the culminating act of retribution which has demanded



the life of Beau Boutan. The use of symbols such as weeds and tractors show how death and decay has been welcomed into the black community through the influence of the Cajuns' presence on the land. Through their impassioned words of suffering, the men verbally initiate a process of exposing the atrocities of the past so that they may begin to redefine who they are and what they represent.

By the time the narrative shifts to Sully, the stage is set for a different take on the racial dynamic from Gil, who is trying to leave the old ways behind. Because Sully is an outsider, his narrative arch serves as an objective means of merging the local view with that of the larger world.

Vocabulary

picket, militant, dosed, bottomland, derrick, chifforobe, bootlicker, lynch, scythe, clapboard, breed



Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11: The men eagerly welcome Miss Merle, who arrives with sandwiches. Lou Dimes, narrating this chapter, comments on how, after her parents died, Candy was raised by Merle and Mathu, as Miss Bea and the Major were determined to be unfit for the duty. Fearing the arrival of Fix, Merle soon exits, escorted to her car by Mapes as the sun goes down.

Chapter 12: In Chapter 12, the narrative shifts to Sully and Gil as they arrive at the Boutan's home on the bayou. Gil enters the full house where he informs his father, Fix, of the situation at the Marshall Plantation and that he believes that Mathu is likely responsible for shooting Beau. Despite the cries for blood, especially from a man named Luke Wills, Gil expresses to Fix that retaliation by lynching is not only the wrong way to go about addressing the circumstances, but that it will jeopardize his goal of becoming an All-American, as he is dependent on his relationship with Cal. Although Fix questions the loyalty of his son, he refuses to seek revenge without the full support of his family. Fix decides to stay home, dismissing his son in anger. Gil heads for the door where he is met with encouraging words from Russell, the deputy, who insists that he will set a better example for his family and race relations in general by playing football with Cal. Gil refuses Sully's offer to drive off.

Analysis

In Chapter 11 several of the functional roles within character relationships come into focus, including the fact that Merle and Mathu raised the orphaned Candy after determining that her aunt and uncle were unfit for the job. While her devotion to her foster-parents is probably the main reason why Candy has been so vocal in defending Mathu, there are also hints of another reason, motivated by her position as part-owner of the plantation, to guard those in her charge; it serves an act of self-preservation.

Lacking any personal stake, Sully is able to deliver an objective view of the violent tension brewing at the Boutan residence. Fix is clearly in charge of the family, but places significant emphasis on the thoughts of his family in making decisions. The generational clash between the violent ways of the old South and the progressive thinking of the new South comes to a head, and Gil, although battered for his efforts, ultimately prevails. Through this confrontation the theme of loyalty is explored as a struggle between honoring a duty to family and being true to one's conscience.

Vocabulary

conspirators, icebox, charade, blacktop, farce, christen, parrain, cracklings, vigilante, accommodate, desecrate, serene



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13: A bayou bar owner named Tee Jack (Jacques Thibeaux) is the narrator of Chapter 13. At one point Tee Jack and another customer named Robert discuss Beau's death and the possibility of a lynching. Jack Marshall is present and affirms Beau's death with disinterest. A stranger who has been listening quietly condemns lynching as a solution. Luke Will arrives with his friends, a group of men who are known for terrorizing local blacks. Will confronts Marshall about not taking control of the situation with Beau and states that he plans on taking up Fix's abandoned quest for revenge.

The stranger, a native Texan who now teaches black writing at Southwestern Louisiana University, challenges Will's violent approach. Marshall gets up to leave and is urged by the professor to end the conflict on his land. Marshall tells the professor to return to Texas if he can't handle the atmosphere. Will and his men soon forcefully remove the professor; left alone, Tee Jack fears that things may soon get out of hand.

Chapter 14: Albert "Rooster" Jackson takes up the narrative, revealing through Mapes that Fix has backed off, thanks to the efforts of Gil. Mathu agrees to go with Mapes but is allowed to stay for a moment while Clatoo has a word with him. When Candy throws a tantrum and threatens to evict everyone for not allowing her to sit in, Mathu criticizes her, saying she only acts as a savior when she's in charge; Lou carries her away to the car to prevent further interference. Once inside, the men discuss what they should do next. Mathu excuses the men from any further obligation, acknowledging that they have not only proven their strength, but also caused him to develop a new respect for them. Before Mathu can leave, Charlie appears and tells someone to call in Mapes.

Analysis

These chapters mainly address the ways in which the different classes of local whites are adapting to the changing racial climate. Marshall carries a disdain for the Cajuns as a lower class, but is trapped in a world of complacency and drunkenness that does not allow him to address either them or the situation on the plantation. Will and his men are remnants of a dying past, desperately trying to hold onto their own identities in the face of extinction. Their desire to get drunk before going to Mathu's house further demonstrates their need to detach themselves from their present reality, as they lack courage to face it directly. Candy's reaction to not being allowed to join in on the meeting between the men exposes her as a person more inclined to subjugation than liberation. It reveals that her status as a member of the ruling class is a much higher priority to her than her position as selfless protector; she is willing to turn against the old men if they show autonomy.

Vocabulary

segregated, bitty, bourbon, civic, chinaball, washbasin, moggassin, spectacle, wharves, dirtdobbers, firehalf, mantelpiece



Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15: Lou returns as narrator of Chapter 15, trying to convince the sulking Candy that inevitable changes in her relationship with Mathu must cause her to change her attitude. He also demands an answer to his proposal of marriage. Her response comes in the form of a slap.

Mapes calls everyone into the house, and Charlie reveals that he is the one who truly killed Beau after an altercation in the cane field. He had asked Mathu, his godfather, to take the fall for him. He claims that after hiding out in the bayou, a voice told him to return and take responsibility for his actions. Because of this, he feels like he is now a man. Charlie agrees to let Mapes take him in, but before they can leave, Luke Will arrives and demands that the killer be handed over.

Chapter 16: Thus begins Coot (Sidney Brooks)'s narration. Mapes tells a trigger-ready Charlie to stand down and is stunned to learn that the old men have armed themselves with live shotgun shells, prepared for a shootout. With his deputy, Griffin, refusing to back him against a white man, Will shoots Mapes in the arm. Once Mapes is down, the old men take to the weeds while the Cajuns duck behind the tractor. A shootout commences.

Analysis

Charlie proves to be the embodiment of change as he confesses to killing Beau. Mirroring the other men's transformation, Charlie manages, during the course of a single day, to evolve from weak and helpless to strong and fearless. The arrival of Luke Will brings about the final stage of the black workers' transition into empowered men. Like the hollow rounds they supposedly carry, the men are assumed by everyone to be empty shells until the standoff. Their possession of live ammo reflects their acquisition of the full spirit that enables them to stand up and fight.

Here the novel quickens its pace and takes a slightly more comedic approach. This represents the absurdity of racial conflict, which by now has been demonstrated as the relic of an era that should be left to pass away.

Vocabulary

quintessence, buck, postholes, loader, sincerity, scrapping, crook, winged, hoarse, ammo



Chapters 17-18

Summary

Chapter 17: Snookum narrates this brief chapter, hiding out while the shootout is going on. The wounded Mapes makes Lou his new deputy and charges him with handling the situation.

Chapter 18: Horace “Sharp” Thompson, one of Will’s men, becomes narrator. explains how the Cajuns are overwhelmed by the strength of the old men. They are also forced to deal with an annoying injury suffered by Leroy, a young member of their group, whose cry for help is turned aside by Mapes. Will is determined to fight, and when he calls out to the other side, his pleas get redirected toward Charlie, who is prepared to put the man down. Will responds to the challenge by leaving his safe haven in search of Charlie.

Analysis

The return of young Snookum as the narrator of Chapter 17 adds to the childish and absurd tone of the comical climax. The ridiculous nature of the conflict is further demonstrated by Mapes who, although not seriously injured, refuses to take part in the fight and hands enforcement duties over to Lou Dimes. The Cajuns prove to be cowards when faced with real opposition, and the tractor that they hide behind, the established symbol of their bid to push out the black workers, becomes the focal point of the old men’s assault, thus showing their ability to become masters of their own fate.

Vocabulary

scolding, sniveling, gut-hanging, trailer



Chapters 19-20

Summary

Chapter 19: Antoine Christopher, known as “Dirty Red” takes up the next part of the story. Charlie smokes a cigarette before going out after Will. Even though the others insist that he could claim self-defense in killing Beau, Charlie, now fearless, heads out after Will anyway. Their standoff leaves both Will and Charlie dead. Everyone gathers around to touch the body of Charlie, hoping that whatever made him strong will somehow rub off on them.

Chapter 20: Lou Dimes closes out the novel as he describes the trial of everyone involved in the shootout. The trial ends in a verdict that gives everyone five years probation and bans them from using or being around firearms. After the trial, Mathu rides off in the truck with the other old men, leaving Lou and Candy together on the steps of the courthouse holding hands.

Analysis

Charlie’s sacrifice takes the pursuit of redefined masculinity to a level that not only allows for a renewed appreciation for life but also engenders the courage to face death without fear. Considering the advanced age of the men, this is especially important in giving them direction about how to move forward in their remaining years.

The final verdict in the trial is the ultimate affirmation of changed times. With each defendant receiving the same type of punishment, the system at large shows its willingness to abandon historically biased approaches to justice. Mathu’s final departure and refusal of Candy’s offer to give him a ride shows that, although their relationship is still strong, it is no longer as co-dependent. Mathu leaves behind what he has often regarded as a privileged position of superiority, learning to accept his own people as equals.

Vocabulary

stub, gash, mothballs, archetypical, compatriots, negligence, sling, deliberate, verdict, defendants, probation, adjourned, gavel



Characters

Candy Marshall

Candy Marshall owns part of the Marshall Plantation and oversees its operation. She orchestrates the plan to bring the old men together in order to help Mathu, the man who helped raise her and who she believes murdered Beau Boutan, a Cajun. While dedicated to the cause of protecting the blacks, she also maintains a noticeable degree of self-awareness regarding her position as a member of the white upper class and tries to maintain firm control over everything that happens. By the end of the novel, her actions hint at a more selfless approach to her relationship with Mathu and others and demonstrates that she is willing to change with world.

Lou Dimes/Louis Alfred Dimoulin

Lou is from Baton Rouge, Louisiana and is the boyfriend and would-be husband of Candy. He is a journalist and represents a different type of Southern man in that he is not constantly engaged in a struggle to prove his own fortitude like the other male characters. This does not prevent others from questioning his manhood, however.

Jack Marshall

Jack is also an owner of the Marshall Plantation, Candy's uncle, and is sometimes referred to as the Major. He is a man of few words and is inebriated most of the time. His complacency and lack of concern for the plantation allow most of the destructive influences throughout the novel to thrive.

Bea Marshall

Bea is another owner of the plantation and is Candy's aunt. Her complacency and ineffectiveness matches that of Jack, and she also spends a great deal of time drinking. Despite her detached approach concerning the duties of running the plantation, she still revels in the superior mindset afforded to her by her position as mistress of the Marshall House.

Mathu

Mathu is the primary suspect in the murder of Beau Boutan, and it is for his protection that the old men have gathered at his house. He is the model of black masculine strength, and he is admired by his community for his fearlessness in the face of adversity. Along with Miss Merle, he assumes the bulk of the responsibility for helping to raise Candy. Although he is strong, he is also flawed and maintains an great degree of



pride which affects his ability to peacefully coexist with other blacks who appear to be of lesser quality. By the end of the novel, he has evolved as a human being and is more accepting of the inherent value of others.

Miss Merle/Myrtle Bouchard

Miss Merle is the mistress of a local plantation and is a mother figure for Candy. She is extremely protective of Candy and assists her in executing the plan to save Mathu. As a member of the white elite, she maintains an air of superiority regarding the blacks and the Cajuns.

Sheriff Mapes

Mapes is the local sheriff. He is strong spirited and respects those, like Mathu, who have the ability to stand up for themselves. It is his duty to investigate the murder of Beau Boutan, and Candy's plan hinders his ability to do his job. His old Southern ways are harsh when it comes to the treatment of blacks, and he shows no mercy for those he perceives as being helpless and weak. He proves to be a complex character whose evolution over the course of the narrative shows that he is amenable to the changing times.

Griffin

Griffin is Mapes's deputy and initially helps him with the scene at the plantation. His disapproval of Mapes's handling of the situation eventually leads him to abandon the Sheriff before the gunfight, resulting in Mapes' injury at the hands of Luke Will.

Russell

Russell is the deputy sent to guard Fix and keep him away from Mathu's house. When Gils's father dismisses him from the house, Russell encourages him, telling him that he did the right thing in trying to stop the violence.

Beau Boutan

Beau Boutan is a Cajun worker who is discovered murdered on the Marshall Plantation before the opening of the story. As a symbol, he represents the antiquated social order and encroaching agricultural transition which has destroyed the black community on the plantation. His death sets off the chain of events which causes the black men to come to the aid of the alleged murderer, Mathu.



Fix Boutan

Fix is the father of Beau and Gil Boutan and is the legendary leader of lynch mobs in Bayonne. He is the archetypical Southern patriarch and places his family above all else. Though Fix only appears briefly, the fear that his reputation instills in the community permeates the novel.

Gil Boutan

Gil is a star football player for Louisiana State and one half of the duo known as “Salt and Pepper.” As the son of Fix and the brother of Beau, he is the most modern thinker of the Boutan family, due mostly to his association with his black teammate, Cal (“Pepper”). He represents the emergence of a new social system which values equal treatment among the races and is instrumental in getting his father to abandon the plan to lynch Beau’s killer.

Sully

Sully is the third-string Irish quarterback who plays at LSU with Gil and Cal. He serves as narrator when with Gil and as an outsider provides an unbiased commentary of the events which transpire. He is a self-proclaimed television nut, or “vidiot.”

Cal Harrison

Cal is a star football player with LSU and is the second half of the duo “Salt and Pepper” alongside Gil. His success on the college level represents the hope of the black community to transcend established racial boundaries.

Luke Will

Luke Will is the leader of the band of men who take up the cause of lynching Beau’s murderer when the Boutans abandon their plans. He is a troublemaker who thrives on making the lives of local blacks miserable and represents fading power of the old Southern mindset of a white lower class which is obsessed with violence.

Sharp/Horace Thompson

Sharp is a member of Luke Will’s lynching party and a one-time narrator. He is shown to be weak in his convictions when the old men put up a fight at Mathu’s house.



Leroy

Leroy is the young Cajun who goes with Will to Mathu's house. He is the only injured survivor of their group. .

Tee Jack/Jacques Thibeaux

Tee Jack is the owner of a local bar and store in the bayou and at one point becomes narrator. He caters to the whims of his customers and although he shares many of the racist ideas of patrons like Luke Will, he also acknowledges the dangers that accompany the ideals they represent.

The Professor

The professor is a native Texan and black writing teacher in Tee Jack's bar who challenges Luke Will's racist views and is ultimately forced out of the bar by the Will and his men.

Charlie

Charlie works on the plantation and is the man who really kills Beau Boutan. He flees the scene, leaving his godfather Mathu to take the blame for the murder. After hiding out in the swamp all day, a voice tells him to return to the plantation and take responsibility for his actions. His ability to finally stand up allows him to achieve the true state of manhood that he has been denied his entire life.

Janey/Janice Robinson

Janey is the servant living at the main house on the Marshall Plantation. She maintains a mindset common to former slaves in her reverence for her employers and insists that the other blacks living on the plantation adopt a similar respect. She represents the lingering effects of the past social order.

Snookum/George Eliot Jr

Snookum is the young male narrator who opens the novel and later describes a portion of the shootout at Mathu's house. His youthful outlook and apparent lack of regard for the formalities of the previous age of black subjugation make him a prime example of the change coming in the future.



Clatoo/Cyril Robilliard

Clatoo narrates one of the chapters and drives the truck that takes the men to Mathu's house. He dislikes the Boutans.

Johnny Paul

Johnny is one of the men who comes to help Mathu.

Reverend Jameson

Reverend Jameson is the only member of the group of men who refuses to fully cooperate with Candy's plan. Despite his opposition, however, he refuses to leave Mathu's house and stays around to complain.

Coot/Sidney Brooks

Coot serves as a narrator in a later chapter. He is a veteran of WWI who volunteers to help out Mathu.

Billy Washington

Billy is one of old men who helps Mathu. He is the first to openly defy convention by talking out of turn to Mapes.

Dirty Red/Antoine Christopher

Dirty Red is another one of the men who comes to Mathu's aid and is also a narrator. He and his family have a reputation for being weak and lazy.

Rufe/Joseph Seabury

Rufe is one the old men who aids Mathu. He also serves as a narrator.

Chimley/Robert Louis Stevenson Banks

He is the first of the old men to serve as narrator and one of the earliest supporters of Mathu.



Mat/Matthew Lincoln Brown

Mat is a narrator and one of the men who helps Mathu. He recognizes the situation with Beau to be a God-sent opportunity for the men to change the way they have been living

Gable

Gable is one of the first men to be questioned by Mapes. His strength helps to raise the spirits of the men early on.

Tucker

He is one of the men who helps Mathu.

Cherry/Grant Bello

Cherry is one of the men who helps Mathu and is also a narrator.

Rooster/Albert Jackson, aka Rooster

Rooster is a member of the group that helps Mathu, and he also serves as a narrator.

Aunt Glo

Glo is Snookum's grandmother and the first character Candy calls upon to relate her plan to save Mathu. She is present when Charlie is killed and allows her grandchildren to touch the body.



Objects/Places

Bayonne, Louisiana

Bayonne, Louisiana is the town where the main story takes place.

Baton Rouge

Lou Dimes lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It is also the location of Louisiana State University, the school Gil and Cal attend.

The Marshall Plantation

The Marshall Plantation is the home of Candy and the Marshall family and the primary setting of the events which take place. Many of the characters either currently work there or have some past association with the plantation.

The Quarters

Formally known as the slave quarters, The Quarters is the name of the area of the plantation is still occupied by a number of black families, including Mathu.

The Tractor

The tractor serves as a symbol for the type of mechanized agricultural practices that allowed the Cajuns to take control of the jobs once held by the blacks. It represents the force which has caused the gradual destruction of the black community due to people moving away in search of work.

Sugar Cane

The destruction of the sugar cane fields is the physical representation of a lost way of life among the blacks who are losing their families and friends to the growing influence of the Cajuns and their agricultural efforts.

Mathu's House

This is the residence of Mathu and the place where the body of Beau Boutan is discovered. The bulk of the action in the story takes place in this specific location.



The Swamp

Charlie flees to the swamp after he kills Beau. He later claims that it aids in his spiritual awakening.

Fix's House

This is the home of Fix Boutan and his family. Gil returns here to convince his father not to take revenge on the blacks at the Marshall Plantation.

Tee Jack's Bar

Tee Jack's Bar is the drinking spot visited by Luke Will and his group before they head out to Mathu's house.

Guns

Guns, at first used as a means to further Candy's plan to trick Mapes, eventually become a symbol of strength and power when they are loaded with live ammo and used against the Cajuns.

The Courthouse

The courthouse is the final location in the story where the characters are put on trial for the parts they played in the incident surrounding the death of Beau Boutan.



Themes

Establishing Manhood and Reshaping the Idea of Black Masculinity

This is the central theme of the novel. The journey of the old men is one of discovering purpose through action and ultimately results in an awakening of self. Having been the victims of circumstances and their own unwillingness to face up to the challenges which confronted them, the old men seek to reclaim the evasive feeling of what it truly means to be men worthy of respect. Although Mathu is upheld throughout the story as the epitome of the masculine ideal, the old men, through their courage, dedication, and willingness to fight for Mathu's cause, become the architects of their own fates and by the end assert their worth as men and human beings.

Racial Interdependence

Though subtle in many respects, the notion of separate races being dependent on one another arises frequently throughout the novel. The most obvious example comes in the form of the football duo, Cal and Gil, who complement each other on the field and have achieved success and recognition under the name "Salt and Pepper." Their cooperation has set them up to become All-American football players, a title which has even greater implications of acknowledging racial equality on a national level. Perhaps less obvious, and indeed less positive and uplifting, are the needs of the members of the community to settle historical accounts with their racial counterparts. Ironically, while intending to break down the racial divide in favor of a more progressive existence, the old men still need the local whites to assume their traditional roles as oppressors in order to achieve their own goals of redemption. Had Luke Will not continued the crusade abandoned by Fix, the old men, especially Charlie, may have been denied the opportunity to take a grand final stand in order to prove their ultimate worth. Along these same lines, the Cajuns also need the blacks in order to breathe life into their fading justifications for continued racial violence.

Challenging Established Social, Racial, and Legal Structures

Conflicts arise throughout the novel showing how divided the characters are across racial lines, as well as within their own races and social spheres of influence. Among the whites, lines are drawn between the plantation owners and the working class Cajuns who are seen as inferior. Among the blacks, their prejudices are based on darkness of skin tone and purity of blood. The accomplishments of Gil and Cal on the LSU football team represent the changing times and the ability of blacks and whites to achieve success through cooperation and teamwork. The final trial at the courthouse also

represents a change in the attitude of the law regarding how blacks are treated. Although the actions of Mapes as an individual officer show that bias and an assumption of black impotence still exists, the ultimate court ruling, which punishes all of the combatants of the shootout equally, demonstrates a shift in adjudication practices which historically disfavored blacks with harsher verdicts.



Style

Point of View

The novel is told from the perspective of fifteen different characters, each having their own chapters and describing events through their own eyes and understanding. The characters use the first person to recount their own observations and ideas while the third person is reserved for the purpose of talking about other characters.

Setting

The story takes place in the late 1970s in Bayonne, Louisiana, a town located in the southwest of the state. The main action takes place in various parts of the Marshall Plantation, shifting from locales such as the Marshall house to the former slave quarters where many of the black characters still reside. During the course of events, there are also times when gathering happen in places off of the plantation, such as in the home of Fix, a local bar, and also the town courthouse.

Language and Meaning

Because the story unfolds in real time, the narrators mostly speak in the present tense and reserve the past tense for instances when they recount the history of certain people and events. The language incorporates the use of local color, a technique which relies heavily on dialect and colloquialism. Many of the terms and phrases used are specific to a character's life and circumstances and are not always used in the grammatically correct fashion. Even familiar words taken on different forms from narrator to narrator and won't necessarily be spelled or used in the same way.

The tone is often narrator specific, with some characters being comical and others more serious. Each character voice is unique and the style of writing changes according to race and position on the social hierarchy, with whites often having a more formal narrative approach and blacks being steeped in dialect. The overall tone across the narratives becomes comedic in terms of pace in the final chapters as a reflection of the author's focus on exposing the absurdity of the racial establishment.

Structure

The novel is divided into chapters following a linear progression of the story. The chapters each have a specific narrator. Some characters, like Lou Dimes and Sully, provide narration in multiple chapters at multiple times.



Quotes

That's right," I said, looking up the road, not at her. "Anytime we say we go'n stand up for something, they say we crazy. You right, we all gone crazy.

-- Mat (Chapter 5)

Not the other cheek?" Gable asked. "Both times you hit the same one—not the other one?

-- Lou Dimes (Chapter 8)

Sometimes you just has to go against your Bible, Sheriff," Uncle Billy told Mapes.

-- Lou Dimes (Chapter 8)

Mapes was a lot of things. He was big, mean, brutal. But Mapes respected a man. Mathu was a man, and Mapes respected Mathu.

-- Rufe (Chapter 9)

I always been militant," Clatoo said. "My intrance gone sour, keeping my militance down.

-- Rufe (Chapter 9)

Like now they trying to get rid of all proof that black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules—like if they had nothing from the starten but motor machines. Sure, one day they will get rid of the proof that we ever was, but they ain't go'n do it while I'm still here.

-- Rufe (Chapter 9)

The world has changed, Papa. Luke Will and his gang are a dying breed. They need a cause like this to pump blood back into their dying bodies.

-- Sully (Chapter 12)

I'm not interested in your war, Luke Will," Fix told him. "I'm only interested in my family. If the majority feels their brother is not worth it, then the family has spoken.

-- Sully (Chapter 12)

You told God you wanted Salt and Pepper to get together, and God did it for you. At the same time, you wanted God to keep Fix the way fix was thirty years ago so one day you would get a chance to shoot him. Well, God couldn't do both. Not that He like Fix, but He thought the other idea was better—Salt and Pepper.

-- Rooster (Chapter 14)

I leaned over and touched him, hoping that some of that stuff he had found back there in the swamps might rub off on me.

-- Dirty Red (Chapter 19)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Thematically, what purpose does the author set out to achieve by having the story told by multiple narrators?

Topic 2

How does Candy's plan to use the old men to protect Mathu contribute to the theme racial interdependence?

Topic 3

How do the domestic relationships between the old men and their wives shape their ideas about manhood and their goal to redefine their masculinity?

Topic 4

What significance does the label "Salt and Pepper" have in regards to the overall meaning of the story and the interactions between the characters?

Topic 5

In what ways do guns aid the old men in achieving their goal of standing up to the local whites?

Topic 6

In what ways does the swamp embody the struggle of the men to rise up and overcome their circumstances?

Topic 7

What is the symbolic importance of the graveyard in the development of the men's resolve to stand up to the whites?



Topic 8

What is the significance of ending the novel with a trial and the ultimate penalty which is handed down by the judge?