In My Father's House Short Guide

In My Father's House by Ernest Gaines

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Contents

Characters

In My Father's House pivots on a single dramatic and catalytic event — the return of Etienne Martin, or Robert X, and his subsequent suicide. Consequently, the cast of primary characters is small, and despite the omniscient narrator, the mood is more introspective than panoramic. If The Autobiography of Miss fane Pittman was Gaines's epic poem, this is his Greek tragedy, focussing as it does on the moral plight of a particular character. It is a tale about the profound isolation of people from one another, ironically set in the context of the effort of blacks to join in political protest and collective racial progress. The main character, Phillip, married to his second wife, Alma, appears to have learned the lessons of life presented by the rootlessness of his early years. He seems to be a welladjusted, successful family man, committed both to his wife and to his career. Yet conflict is hinted at rather early on, not only because the reader can connect Robert X or Etienne to him, but also because his wife complains that they have a shallow relationship and that he never confides in her. Similarly, he tells no one the truth about his son for four days, until the son's arrest by the local sheriff forces an admission which leads to his son's demise. Like a Greek tragic hero, he has achieved great prominence, yet is marred by the fatal flaw of his past and his present cowardice.

The characters, both primary and secondary, may be divided into two groups — those from Martin's second life, and those from his first. Members of the two groups seldom cross paths, the notable exception being Alma's visit to Chippo's place near the very end of the book, where she attempts to function as the bridge to join and reintegrate the two lives. Notable in the first group is Virginia Colar, Robert X's landlady, an "ordinary" person whose insights do much to characterize both Robert and the community of St.

Adrienne. The schoolteacher, Elijah Green, who lives at Reverend Martin's house (the most expensive owned by a black man in St. Adrienne), and Shepherd Lewis, who brings Robert X to the party hosted by Martin and Elijah, are leaders among a group of teachers who frequent a popular night spot for blacks. The current mission of Reverend Martin to force a Cajun store owner, and known but unprosecuted rapist, Albert Chenal, to pay equitable wages to blacks, and his job as a prominent preacher brings the more prominent black citizens, and some whites, to the Martin house. Also important in the group are Howard Mills, the head deacon, and Jonathan Robillard, the fiery young assistant pastor, who later usurps Phillip's position when Phillip compromises the interests of the whole community in order to get Robert XEtienne out of jail. Notable other women characters from this first group are Alma, Martin's second wife; Beverly Ricord, Shepherd Lewis's girlfriend; Sister Claiborne and Sister Jackson, two old black women who evoke Miss Jane in their speech and attitudes; and wives of some of the white professionals present at the party. Joyce Ann and Patrick, Martin's two children from his second marriage, who are sensitive and properly raised, also figure in this first, civic-minded group. Sheriff Nolan, not present at the party, is a nasty white character who uses his position to bait Martin into abandoning the demonstration against Chenal's store, exacerbating the conflict between private and public responsibility, one of the major themes of the book.

Critics have complained both about the character of Robert X-Etienne and Phillip himself. Robert X-Etienne is negative and suicidal, not to mention vindictive. He is no longer capable of human feeling because he is so totally consumed by the injustice of his life.

Yet negative as they are, his feelings appear justifiable. Etienne has been isolated even from his only brother, Antoine, who served a five-year prison term for the attempted murder of his sister's rapist, and who disowned his whole family upon getting out of jail.

Martin's desertion has ruined the whole family. Martin pleaded psychological paralysis — paralysis that did not let up until he found Jesus — as his excuse, which neither satisfies the angry son nor some reviewers, who find the dichotomies in Martin's character impossible to reconcile. Such characters seem to threaten, rather than support, the struggle of blacks for equality and respect. Yet Martin's painful feelings distinguish him from less sensitive men who would deny any responsibility for an ex-wife and her children. The father and son are credible characters; Gaines seems to be exploring the pathological side of social oppression while still asserting the ability of black people to thrive both psychologically and politically.

Another character who bridges both the lives of Phillip Martin is Chippo Simon, a one-eyed former merchant marine whose name comes from his speed in chopping wood. He has taken Johanna and her children away from the town and later helps Martin find out what has happened to them in the interim. Martin finds Chippo through his godmother, Angelina, an energetic matriarch, who still lives on the Reno plantation where Martin spent his youth and married Johanna. Chippo tells both Martin and the reader about his abandoned family. Johanna has been patient; though she is beautiful and has had a string of lovers, none of them have replaced Martin in her heart. The last, Quick George, raped Justine, the daughter, occasioning both Antoine's imprisonment and Etienne's psychological breakdown, and presumably Johanna's own psychological paralysis. In twenty years, Johanna has become old in appearance and has lost teeth. Chippo describes his last meeting with her as so painful that he can barely talk about it.

The whole scene of the novel changes drastically as Martin searches for Chippo and news of his family in Baton Rouge, mainly in slum areas where "twenty years ago it used to be lively, but now it was dead." In the city, blacks seem much less fortunate than in St. Adrienne. The rest of the plot unfolds in Baton Rouge, where Martin almost deserts his second family over grief about abandoning his past one, and he even threatens to spend the night with an old girlfriend.

Yet he is rescued by Beverly and Alma, who recognize both the irony of his situation and his true worth as a man and a leader. Alma's name is obviously well-chosen, for she nurtures Phillip, and helps him reconcile the conflict between past and present, and public and private lives. Gaines strongly makes the point here that one's own personal integrity, including responsibility for one's sexuality and one's family, figures in public leadership, and also must be the basis for a person's self-esteem.

Social Concerns/Themes

In My Father's House explores a universal range of social concerns, although many of them are by-products of racism. It concentrates on matters that were only subthemes in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971): the oppression of women, marital infidelity, social instability amid the poverty and uncertainty of a racist society, the isolation of those who seek to effect change, and the neglect of children.

The pivotal ethical predicament of the novel is the dilemma of the main character, Phillip Martin, who has, in an earlier life, abandoned his wife and three children. This action comes back to haunt him after he has remarried and become a prominent minister and civic leader. His son, Etienne, suddenly appears in St. Adrienne, Louisiana, having adopted the name Robert X. (That these names suggest the civil rights leaders, Martin Luther King, Jr.

and Malcolm X has been noted by several reviewers.) Many reviewers find unpalatable soap operatic elements in Martin's dilemma, but charges of melodrama and sensationalism are unwarranted when racial and social oppression are the issues. Although Martin has obvious moral flaws, the punishment of having to bear not only his son's awkward return but also his suicide, is extreme. The powerful expression of the suffering of blacks in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman has a positive and hopeful outcome; here, however, it becomes an occasion to explore some of the negative, soulchilling results of social oppression.

This novel focusses on the plight of the black male, despite a subtheme of the awful toll on the black female exemplified by the plight of Martin's deserted first wife, Johanna. The return of Robert X, his subsequent suicide, and the manifestation of Phillip Martin's past is a terrible emotional blow that also results in the destruction of Phillip Martin's career. At the end, Phillip concedes to his present wife, "I'm lost Alma. I'm lost." Alma's reply, however, seems lost on critics who tend to read the novel too negatively: she says, "Shh. Shh. We just go'n have to start again." Her words evoke a spiritual and physical toughness and should not be discounted.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Distinguished from The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman by its use of a single pivotal action and its conse quences, and by the use of an omniscient narrator, In My Father's House has roots in tragic drama, both Greek and British. The revenge motif links it to these forms and evokes plots from other literature and film where the "stranger" returns to town and turns out not to be a stranger after all.

Gaines's use of the motif is daring in the context of black literature because he is alluding to potentially offensive material about his own people. While much literature by black writers centers on a single male character, such as Richard Wright's Black Boy (1937) and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952), the action usually progresses toward greater freedom and a sense of dignity against harrowing odds. This book, however, is about the fall of a black man over a matter that a lesser man might dismiss out of hand. Martin ends up in what is practically a fetal position at the end, being comforted by Alma, making him in some eyes a very poor role model; yet his tragic flaw has been that he has not been able to accept his need for others or share his feelings.

Gaines's use of metaphor and symbolism is unobtrusive, yet very effective. For example, Phillip has put up a gate near his house in St. Adrienne made of cypress, a funereal and very strong wood, suggesting the wall of isolation he has built around himself, and which he later decides to tear down. Creative treatment of settings, for which Gaines is well-known, is seen in this novel, as in the use of the winter setting, in the contrast between St. Adrienne and Baton Rouge, and between the suburban town and the plantation. The central irony of Phillip's attempted salvation of his people, and his false conception of his own redemption, challenges the Christian concept of finding Jesus or being saved just once, implying that an ongoing process is needed. There is humor in such irony, and humor abounds in this book despite its predominantly tragic tone.

Related Titles

Phillip Martin is a contrast to the flinty determined heroes of Catherine Carmier (1964) and Of Love and Dust (1967), even though he is a civic leader.

His young assistant, Jonathan, is more typical of these feisty, earlier male characters. Gaines mentions in an interview the difficulty of writing In My Father's House, commenting that it took him much longer to write than his other books. There is also a contrast between the structure of this book and earlier ones, owing perhaps to his daring exploration of character. In the other books where characters are thwarted or defeated by external forces, a simple shooting often resolves the plot, as in Catherine Carmier or Of Love and Dust, or a death, as in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. Here the ending is more tentative, as if to emphasize the theme of the ongoing struggle. The themes of the earlier works appear here, especially that of the struggle of blacks in the larger community, but this book has a larger scope simply because it probes more deeply into psychological and moral flaws in the main character.

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