The Sky Is Gray Study Guide

The Sky Is Gray by Ernest J. Gaines

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Ernest J. Gaines was thirty in 1963, the year in which "The Sky is Gray" was first published, but it was not until five years later, in 1968, that the story was published as the second story in *Bloodline*, the thematically interwoven collection with which readers associate it today. Written during the most turbulent years of the Civil Rights movement, the stories in *Bloodline* describe a less turbulent but perhaps even more racially raw period: Louisiana in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

"The Sky is Gray"contains many of the themes and images Gaines returns to again and again in his work: themes of personal responsibility, grace under pressure, and moral behavior; images of strong mothers, mysteriously absent fathers, and families in which love is expressed more often in harsh words or silence than in overt praise or affection. Supporting these ideas is Gaines's keen awareness of the all-pervasive and profoundly formative influence of race on virtually every aspect of life in the rural South of this era. Though he would no doubt take issue with the South being described as a singular place and would certainly argue that it is many places, each different, each having unique gifts of nature and people, each facing unique challenges, he would just as surely agree with W. E. B. Du Bois's famous observation, in the "Forethought" of *The Souls of Black Folk*, that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line," for it is this "color line" in all of its manifestations that his work so carefully documents.

Author Biography

Ernest J. Gaines was born on River Lake Plantation in Oscar, a hamlet of Pointe Coupee Parish in rural Louisiana. He was the first of twelve siblings, seven by his father Manuel, five by his mother Adrianne's second husband, Ralph. His father left his mother when Gaines was a small boy, forcing his mother to move to New Orleans to find work. Gaines was left in the care of his great aunt, Augustine Jefferson, a woman he preferred to call his aunt and whom he considered one of the most powerful influences on the formation of his character. The experiences of his early years, particularly the experience of paternal abandonment, provided the bedrock on which his fiction would later be built.

In 1948, at the age of fifteen, Gaines moved to Vallejo, California, to join his mother and stepfather, because there were no high schools for blacks near his home. Ralph was strict about the kinds of children he would allow Gaines to befriend; because of his stepfather's insistence that most of the local children were trouble, Gaines turned to the local public library for entertainment and solace—an institution that had been closed to him in Louisiana because he was black. There he developed a keen interest in reading, and he wrote his first novel the next year; on news of its rejection, he destroyed the only manuscript copy he possessed.

After graduating from high school, Gaines attended Vallejo Junior College, did a stint in the Army, and then returned to the Bay Area to take a degree from San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University). With his degree in hand, Gaines won the Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship for Graduate Work which allowed him to begin work in Stanford's Creative Writing program, the first of many fellowships he has received. Other awards he has received include the Joseph Henry Jackson Literary Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Study Award, a Rockefeller Foundation Grant-in-Aid, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a MacArthur Fellowship, and honorary doctorates from Denison University, Brown University, Bard College, Whittier College, and Louisiana State University.

His publication record is not extensive, but his works have been well received. His first bona-fide publications—"The Boy in the Double-Breasted Suit" and "The Turtles"—were published in San Francisco State College's *Transfer* magazine in 1956. Subsequent publications included the short stories "A Long Day in November" (1959), "Just Like a Tree" (1962), and "The Sky is Gray" (1963), and the novels *Catherine Carmier* (1964), *Of Love and Dust* (1967), *Bloodline* (1968), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), *In My Father's House* (1978) *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993).

Plot Summary

The action in "The Sky is Gray" is broken up into thirteen short sections which describe a half day or so in the life of James, an eight-year-old black boy in the rural South of the late 1930s. The story begins with James and his mother waiting, on a painfully cold morning, for the arrival of a bus which will take them to nearby Bayonne. As they wait, his mother thinks about home—about his aunt, the other children, the farm animals and the weather—the narrative follows James's thoughts back to the origins of his toothache.

Not wanting to be a "crybaby" and knowing well that his mother cannot afford a trip to the dentist, James recalls his efforts to disguise his pain from the rest of his family. But this state of affairs does not last—his Auntie soon discovers that his tooth is rotten. When aspirin fails to work, Auntie wants to tell James's mother; James convinces her not to, so they turn instead to a neighbor, Monsieur Bayonne, for a prayer cure. But this cure fails, too. The scene in which James's mother is told—or discovers—that her son must go to the dentist is skipped over, but the family's poverty, and the comparatively huge cost of having the tooth pulled, is not. James's mother talks at length about how much it will cost while James pretends to sleep.

James's thoughts then turn to the memory of two redbirds he and his brother, Ty, had trapped, and to his mother's inexplicable insistence that he kill them and her equally inexplicable fury when he couldn't. Only now, in the narrative present, as an "almost eight" year-old boy, can James understand why she forced him to do this. She was preparing him to take care of himself in case she had to go away like his father did.

The bus arrives and, while his mother pays, James moves to the back of the bus, where the blacks are made to sit. James soon finds himself walking through the cold of Bayonne. After a long walk, they finally arrive at the dentist's office, which is already full of people waiting to be treated. A woman tries to engage James's mother in conversation, but a man James takes to be a preacher joins in instead. The woman wonders why the Lord allows people to suffer, saying that she doesn't understand it, but the preacher concludes that it's something no human can understand. This comment incites a young man—a teacher, James thinks, or a student—to join in. Shortly thereafter the nurse enters the room and announces that the doctor will not treat anyone until one o'clock.

With nowhere to go, and no money to buy anything, James and his mother have no choice but to walk, aimlessly, until the doctor's office opens again. They briefly duck into a hardware store to warm up, but must soon leave. With more than an hour to go before the doctor's office will reopen and sleet starting to fall, James's mother decides to spend their bus money on something to eat and walk home. Eventually they are stopped by an old white lady named Helena who has watched them each time they passed by. She insists that they come inside while she calls the dentist to tell him that they are coming. She offers them food, but though James is hungry, his mother will not accept any

charity, so Helena has James move some empty trash cans to the street as a face-saving gesture for his mother.

Their meal finished, James and his mother thank the woman for her hospitality. James's mother opens the door to exit, but turns and asks for twenty-five cents worth of salt meat. Helena tries to give them a larger piece, but James's mother insists on an accurate measure. On the street again, James turns his collar up to keep his neck warm; his mother tells him not to, because only bums turn their collars up, and he is not a bum, he is a man.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Sky is Gray, by Ernest Gaines, opens with a young boy and his mother waiting for a bus. The boy watches anxiously, but the mother is looking back from where they came. The road is just an old gravel road out in the country, with weeds, trees, fences, and cows on both sides. It's so cold out that the boy can see the steam from the cows' nostrils, as they breathe.

The boy is extremely attuned to his mother, even stating that he knows what she's thinking about. At that moment, he believes that she's thinking about how things are going back at the home they've left. He knows that his mother is worrying about whether his "auntie" has enough wood to keep them warm, and whether she can take care of the other members of his family while they're gone. He mentions Ty and Val, and then states that his mother never has to worry when he is left in charge of things, because he's the oldest, and she tells him he's "the man."

The mother is wearing a black coat and hat and looks very sad. Even though the boy wants to comfort her by putting his arm around her and telling her he loves her, he does not do it. His mother has taught him that showing emotion is for crybabies. It's a sign of weakness. He comments that his mother has whipped his brother Ty, because he is afraid of ghosts. The boy knows that he can't cry or show fear, so he doesn't tell his mother when he develops a terrible toothache. Ty notices, but the narrator refuses to talk, keeping his mouth shut, partly because it hurts so badly when the air hits his tooth. Kept awake at nights because of the pain, the boy listens to Ty in the bed beside him, and to his Auntie and his sister Val, who sleep in the same room. He just feels the hurt of his bad tooth.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The Sky is Gray is written in dialect form. The opening lines, "Go'n be coming in a few minutes. Coming round that bend down there full speed" indicate that the speaker is from the deep South. It's a rural environment, and the family is probably poor, as several people sleep in the same room. The boy's feelings for his mother - love, fear, desire to please - are the overriding emotional elements. He doesn't tell his mother how much he loves her, because she doesn't like the sentimental show of affection. She values strength and stoicism, an attitude that creates an emotional conflict with the boy, because he is not able to express his true feelings. The overwhelming physical element in the first chapter is the boy's very real pain from his toothache, and the issue of pain is central to the story as the boy learns how to handle, sublimate or overcome pain. Both characters are unnamed. The cold air presents a physical conflict, and foreshadows the difficulties that the weather produces later in the story. The cold also symbolizes

exposure to the outside world. The boy feels safe and happy at home, but out in the cold, he is exposed to a different and harsher world.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The boy, who is narrating the story, admits that even though he tried to hide his pain, his Auntie knew about it. She advises him to mash up aspirin and put it in a little cotton to put on his tooth. However, that doesn't help. He doesn't want his Aunt to tell his Mama, because he knows they don't have any money. Instead, his aunt refers him to Monsieur Bayonne, whose method for curing the boy's pain is to pray over him. Monsieur Bayonne does the sign of the Cross on the boy's jaw and prays for a long time. When the boy admits that the pain is not improving, Monsieur Bayonne asks what kind of prayers he's praying. The boy says, "Baptist." Bayonne believes it's because the boy doesn't know any Catholic prayers that his tooth won't quit hurting. After the boy says he knows "Hail Mary," Bayonne instructs him to use that prayer. Bayonee performs the Sign of the Cross on his jaw again, and the tooth eventually eases up.

Since he's feeling better, the boy and his brother, Ty, decide to go hunting with the hounds, which kill a rabbit. By this time, the tooth is hurting again, and he can't sleep at all that night. His Aunt sends him back to Monsieur Bayonne the next morning. He instructs him to kneel down at the stove and pray Catholic prayers, since he doesn't know anything about "that Baptist."

Chapter 2 Analysis

While the boy is waiting for the bus, he flashes back to a day or two before when he remembers what his Aunt and her friend did to try to cure him of his toothache. The boy's world is influenced by two different religious affiliations: Catholic and Baptist. While he is familiar with the Baptist denomination, his Auntie's friend, Monsieur Bayonne, is Catholic and believes that only Catholic prayers will resolve the boy's pain. Monsieur Bayonne lives nearby, because Ty and the narrator hear him playing the guitar at night. The fact that the prayers are ineffective in healing his toothache emphasizes the practical problems with religion, and foreshadows a similar conflict later in the story. The boy continues to hide his pain from his mother.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Before she goes to bed early that evening, the boy's mother tells him that they're going to town the next day. The boy remembers that she didn't always go to bed so early, at least not before his Daddy went into the Army. When he wakes up, he sees his mother and his Auntie standing before the fireplace, talking about how much money she has to get them to town. She has $1.50, just barely enough for the bus ride there and back, a tooth extraction, and a small piece of salt pork. The Aunt calls the boy "James," and tells him to get ready. She tells Ty to get up, too. Ty is angry, because he's not going anywhere and doesn't think he should have to get up. Auntie feeds the boys warm bread and syrup. Ty complains about always eating syrup and bread, until his Auntie threatens him. She tells him that some people don't even have syrup with their bread. James' mother warms herself before the fireplace before they leave to catch the bus.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The boy is now called by a name, "James." In a flashback, the boy remembers the events of the night before and in the morning before they leave for the bus. He and his brother, Ty, demonstrate the kind of relationship that occurs between people who live closely and intimately with each other. Ty complains that, because they had to arouse James early to catch the bus, he suffers. He also complains about the food. Ty has also been privy to James' pain and situation up to this point. Money is scarce, and the two older women of the family are scraping together money to meet their needs. For the first time in the story, James remembers that times were happier when his father was around, that his mother didn't always go to bed so early. The absence of his father signals a change in the family's welfare and illustrates why the mother is so against displays of emotion. The family has to be strong while he's away fighting in the Army.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The narrative returns to the scene at the bus stop. James wants to tell his mother that the bus is still not coming, but he knows that he would simply be repeating an obvious fact. His mother would rather not talk than say something that is unnecessary. Instead, he watches the birds out on the water, the "pool-doos." He wonders if you can eat pool-doos and recounts the numerous other kinds of birds he has eaten; including, owls and blackbirds. This thought causes him to remember a painful incident, where his mother made him kill two redbirds that had gotten into his trap. James didn't want to do this, but his mother insisted, and no amount of argument from James was going to change her mind. He keeps telling her, "I can't kill him....," but she forces him use a fork to wound the bird's leg so that she can reach in. Once she gets the bird out of the cage, she quickly pokes him in the neck with the fork, telling James that now that they've got one bird, he must get the other. She hits James again and again when he refuses, until his Auntie comes out to see what's happening. His Aunt calls James' mother by her name, "Octavia," and insists that Octavia explain to the boy, rather than just beat him.

James says that even though he's still young, he understands why his mother made him kill those redbirds. He still laments about how small the birds were, but the family ate those two little birds and everybody got a small taste. They were all proud of him. He believes that his mother forced this act upon him so that he could be the supporter of the family if she ever went away like their Daddy had. James admits that he came to understand that there had to be somebody left to carry on after his Auntie and Monsieur Bayonne had explained it to him.

Chapter 4 Analysis

James' mother, Octavia, forces him to behave in ways that are not natural to him, nor natural to most people. The boy has a flashback to the "bird-killing" incident. He does not want to kill the redbirds, thinking about how small and pretty they are. Octavia's behavior seems harsh, hitting and smacking her child to make him kill something lovely. James, however, has come to an understanding of his mother, evidenced by the fact that he consciously thinks about how to act with her. He doesn't show emotion, doesn't hug her or talk to her about things she can see for herself. The impetus for his behavior might be one of fear or genuine understanding about Octavia's motives. His Auntie and Bayonne have tried to explain his mother's motives to James when she makes him kill the birds. They say that she is trying to make him strong, that he has to be able to provide for the family in case something happened to his mother.

The incident where James is forced to kill the birds is symbolic of him having to grow up and do difficult tasks, especially since his father is gone. As the oldest child, he has to be the "man of family." James' Auntie had told his mother to explain to him, instead of

beat him, but his mother is unable to do that. In trying to be both father and mother, and in trying to teach her son to be strong, Octavia has lost her warmth and compassion and doesn't talk about why she is forcing him to kill the birds. James has to submit blindly to his mother without understanding, until his mother's motives are explained to him later. The bird-killing incident mirrors the larger theme of the whole story, that of leaving childhood and growing into manhood by doing difficult tasks and facing harsh conditions.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

James sees the bus and starts waving with his handkerchief. When it stops for them, Octavia tells James to go to the back of the bus, while she pays their fare. He notices the people looking at him, and he passes the signs that say "white" and "colored" designating the assigned seating areas. There is only one free seat, which he leaves for his mother. Then, he just leans against it.

James describes the other people on the bus. There's a lady sitting next to his mama, who smiles at him. He doesn't smile back, because he's afraid to open his mouth and let the air in, causing his tooth even more pain. The lady offers him a piece of gum, but understands when he gestures to his jaw. There's a girl with a red coat and a big braid sitting across from James. They pretend they don't see each other, but they both keep sneaking glances at each other. The girl has a cold and won't blow her nose on her handkerchief. Every time she starts to, lady next to her says something causing the girl to put her hands back in her lap. James smiles at her a little bit, but the girl doesn't smile back, so they both turn away. James studies the scenery.

The bus is rolling through the countryside, and James is able to see the river and the trees, both of which he says are gray. After watching the landscape pass, he looks to the white people in the front of the bus before he begins looking at the little girl again. He likes the little girl, but doesn't want anyone to know it. The lady next to the girl says something to the girl that provokes her into saying, "I don't love him nothing," which everyone in the back of the bus hears. James replies that he doesn't love her either, and they engage in an exchange that demonstrates they are interested in each other, but in the ways of eight-year-olds, they only prove this by antagonizing each other. He ignores her. She sticks her tongue out at him, and he pretends he's going to hit her, making everyone around them laugh.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Racial segregation begins to be an apparent theme in this story, as James notices the different seating arrangements on the bus, with the white people being in the front and the colored being in the back. This troubling issue, however, is lightened by the antics of the young children who behave in a typical fashion. They watch each other, are interested in each other, but pretend that they can't stand each other.

The scene on the bus indicates the conflict between James, as a child, and the expectations his mother has of James being a man. On the bus, James is clearly a child, playing with another eight-year-old playmate. Being inside the bus, sheltered from the cold and the wind, also represents the safety of being "enclosed," and allows James to play as a child instead of fighting the elements.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

James and Octavia arrive in the tiny town of Bayonne. James remembers going to Baton Rouge once with his Mamma, Daddy, and Ty, but recalls that that incident was before his father went into the Army. He begins to think about his Dad, wondering if they'll ever see him again. His thoughts quickly shift to the deteriorating condition of the sidewalks in Bayonne.

The weather is very cold with an extreme wind, and James' nose begins to run. His mother reminds him to use the handkerchief, which he does. They walk past a school, where white children are playing. As they pass a cafy, James wants to look in, longing to be in there, because he's cold and hungry, but Octavia tells him he must keep his eyes "where they belong."

James and his mother walk and walk, going past stores, cafes, the shoe shop, and because James is looking at the man in the shoe store, he runs into a white woman. They continue past the courthouse, where James notices that the flag that's flying there has fewer stars and is different than the one they have at their school. Finally, they arrive at the dental office filled to capacity with people. James' mother tells his name to the white lady, and then James hears someone yelling. Another little boy in the waiting room, even younger than James, hears the noise and starts wailing himself. The boy's mother is unable to keep him quiet.

The man, who had been in the dentist's office yelling, comes out with his hand to his face. He leaves with another man, who asks him a question. He can't answer because of the pain. The nurse calls the name of "John Lee Williams," the other little boy who is squealing and crying, as his mother carries him into the office. The lady next to James and Octavia makes conversation by saying that she doesn't understand why God makes children suffer like that, and another man says that people shouldn't question God. The lady replies that she thinks maybe they should question, a remark which provokes a heated conversation with a man who James believes is a preacher. The preacher is a fat man, who says that God should never be questioned. The lady makes the comment, "And look like it's the poor who suffers the most." At this point, John Lee Williams begins to yell. His screaming causes the lady to remark that the man they're waiting for is not a good dentist, but that the colored people come to him, because he's so much cheaper than Dr. Robillard. The lady tries to engage Octavia in conversation, but she won't say much, only that they're from around Morgan.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The theme of racial inequity continues with James being told not to even look at cafes where white people are eating as they walk to the dentist's office. One of the clients in

the dentist's office remarks that this is the cheaper of the two dentists in town, which is why so many colored people come. The cries of pain from patients who've been called into the back of the office serve as a background for the conversation between people waiting in the front, and subtly echo the theme of pain. James' mother doesn't respond much to the other lady's initiative, but James listens closely to the conversation that the lady has with the preacher about whether or not God's motives should be questioned. The question is not just about acceptance of the traditional religious beliefs, but also a question about acceptance of the social status quo. The lady is referring to the suffering of a child, but her comment foreshadows the issue the young black man brings up in the next chapter of why anyone, especially black people, should suffer without asking questions of those in charge.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

A man sitting next to James and Octavia begins to respond to the conversation about whether or not people should question God. He begins by commenting that the trouble with black people is that they don't question anything when they should be questioning everything. James believes that the man looks like a teacher or a college student. The preacher is indignant that the young man would say such a thing and reminds him that his conversation with the woman was based on questioning God. The young man replies that even God's existence should be questioned. The preacher throws an insult back by asking why black people are educating their young. The young man is quick to respond that no one is educating him, because he's working his own way through school. After an insult where the preacher makes a derogatory comment about thinking the young man was intelligent before he heard him talk, the two get down to a discussion about faith versus reason. When the young man asks how God's existence can be proven, the preacher says that he feels it in his heart. The young man says that a heart is simply an internal organ for pumping blood.

The heated conversation between the preacher and the young man continues. The preacher asks the other man about his family, and the young man responds that his mother's in the hospital and his father is dead. The preacher thinks that the younger man is simply angry. The young man, however, says that asking questions doesn't mean he's angry, and he implies that there are many black people who are asking questions. He refers to himself and the nameless others as "us." When the preacher says that he's sorry for this young man, the young man declares that he's going to make it in the world, and the only reason the preacher pretends pity for him is because the people who ask questions are rocking the fundamentals of his world.

The young man espouses his belief that the preacher believes in God, because a white man told him to. It's the white man's desire to keep him ignorant, a comment which offends the preacher, because he's being called ignorant. The big preacher goes to the younger man and demands that he stand up. When he does that, the preacher hits the young man in the face so hard that he falls back against the wall. The young man, then, "turns the other cheek," this time bracing himself so that when the preacher hits him again, he doesn't fall against the wall. The boy comments that being hit hasn't changed a thing. The preacher breathes heavily and says to the people in the waiting room, "I never felt so sorry for a man before," while the younger man just goes back to his reading. The preacher apologizes to those in the waiting room and leaves. Nobody says anything.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This is a turbulent episode, and the major conflict of the story, illustrating the divisions within a group where one black man argues with another. The younger man represents the new generation, which is rebelling against the restrictions placed upon them by white men. The preacher, on the other hand, represents the accepted belief in religion and tradition. Yet, it is the younger man who is capable of turning his other cheek and demonstrating the principals that the preacher is supposed to represent. The violence of the preacher against the young man, who is expressing his opinion, causes the reader to question the validity of religion. The religious conflict is intertwined with the racial conflict, as well. According to the young man in the dental office, the acceptance of a traditional religion only keeps the black people subservient to whites. Instead of using their minds, they are kept in a state of ignorance by relying on a blind faith. The conflicts in this chapter are the conflicts of the entire story: acceptance of God versus disbelief, the acceptance of the status quo versus the rebellion against tradition and society, the reliance on religion versus the reliance on self, and the contrast between young and old.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The nurse in the dental office continues to call patients in, and people keep coming in, all of them wearing heavy winter coats and talking about the sleeting, ugly weather outside. The room is filled with smoke and noisy now, because multiple conversations have started up again. James wants to sleep, but he's afraid he and maybe his mother might fall asleep and miss their turn. He begins thinking about his Mama. James plans to get her a new coat when they have money from the next cotton crop. The coat will be red, not black.

The lady sitting next to Octavia starts up a conversation, commenting on how grown-up James acts and asking his mother if she wants a book to read. Octavia doesn't say anything back, and soon the lady starts talking to the young man who had argued with the preacher. The lady asks the young man if it's true that he really doesn't believe in God. He answers that he doesn't believe, and when questioned as to his reason, he tells her that "the wind is pink." The woman is surprised and goes on and on about his comment. She asks him what color the grass is if the wind is pink, and the man replies that the grass is black. The lady informs this young man that the grass is green and has always been green. His argument to her is that the grass is only "called" green. There's no way to prove it, and she only thinks it's green, because that's what she's been told. He tells her that words don't mean anything, and that the only thing that counts is action.

The young man continues his argument by saying that the same people who say grass is green say that black people are citizens, but they don't have the same rights as other citizens. The woman argues that things are changing, but the young man says that there are now young black males who are starting to think with their minds and not believe what everyone says. His philosophy is that the only thing that matters is action, not words and what people say. The lady reminds him that the heart is always important and that a person shouldn't depend entirely on his mind. However, the young man says he was born too late to believe in God. He hopes that the generation after him can rely more on their heart and their faith than he can, because he has nothing to believe in. For him, the wind is pink.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter again reiterates the theme of racial division. The young man is unwilling to accept the status quo of society. He argues for action, as well as for intelligent questioning of the way things have always been. His argument that the wind is pink demonstrates that the word only has meaning, because people have assigned that meaning. His discussion is important to the story and its title: "The Sky Is Gray." If the young man is to believed, the sky might also have been perceived as orange or purple, because the meaning of the color is something assigned by men. His beliefs spill over

into his religion. The young man doesn't believe in a God who allows the inequities between races, and his beliefs highlight the conflict between races and religious dogma.

Octavia continues not to talk or interact much with other people, refusing to make conversation with the lady who sits next to her. James' attitude toward his mother consists of both adoration and concern for her, (in his dreaming of getting her a new coat,) and of fear. He doesn't want to dose off in the waiting room, because he's afraid they'll miss their turn, and Octavia would be mad. The circumstances and his mother's behavior toward him force James to act more mature than a typical child, and add to the story's theme of growing into manhood.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The nurse announces that the doctor won't be taking any more patients until 1:00 in the afternoon. Octavia talks to the nurse and tells her that she has to get back to the field in the afternoon. She pleads with the nurse (who is white,) to allow her to at least speak to the doctor about how much James' tooth is hurting him. The nurse just tells her to come back later, and the lady sitting next to Mama tells her that she didn't get to see the doctor, because she's black. White people don't have to wait so long.

James and Octavia go outside and stand around. Soon, they begin to walk even though his mother doesn't know where she's going. They walk past the stores where James notices the shoes on the dummy in the window. He thinks that in the summer, maybe he'll have those shoes, too. They continue walking, looking at the store windows. When they come to a cafy for white people, Octavia reminds James to keep his eyes in front of him. As they walk, James gets hungrier and colder, and his nose runs before his mother reminds him to wipe it. Some men whistle at Octavia, but she ignores them. They just keep walking, passing another cafy where white people eat. James' nose keeps running.

Soon, they come to David's Hardware Store, and they go inside. Octavia signals to him to stay by the stove while she goes back to ask about buying an axe handle. One of the men in the store shows her axe handle after axe handle, which she pretends to inspect by hefting, touching and swinging them. She finally turns around and tells James to follow her. They leave the store, only to walk some more with James' stomach growling so loudly that he's sure his mother hears it. She doesn't say anything to him.

Chapter 9 Analysis

James recognizes the differences between his life and the lives of others. He notices that other people have heavy coats for cold weather, that they have better shoes, and that they're allowed to eat in restaurants where he can't even look in. He wants what they have, but he never says anything or complains. He just observes. He is hopeful that he, too, will be able to attain these things: a new coat for his mother, a new pair of shoes for himself. However, it all depends on the next cotton crop. While Octavia doesn't say anything to him, (other than telling him to blow his nose,) she is not oblivious to his discomfort. Her going into the hardware store and stalling for time with the axe handles is done so that James can warm himself by the stove. The fact that she takes him to the dentist and tries to ease the difficulties of their situation demonstrates that she is caring and concerned.

The cold weather and bitter wind and sleet constitute both a conflict and a symbolism. The conflict is between body and spirit: how to survive the ravages of the weather, and

how to keep going in spite of discomfort. James has learned not to complain, and in following the training of his mother, he is also crossing into the adult world. The cold outdoors is symbolic of the "cold, cruel world," and exemplifies the obstacles that James has to overcome.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

James and his mother walk back to the courthouse where the clock shows that they've still got another hour and fifteen minutes before they can go back to the dentist's office. It's now sleeting. James wants to stand close to Octavia, but he knows she doesn't like that kind of stuff and would call him a "crybaby." She would remind him that he's got to stand up by himself. They cross back to the dental office, but find the door is locked. James sees the look on Octavia's face and doesn't say anything, because he is afraid of her when she's like this. When Octavia asks him if he's hungry, he says that he's not, because he knows she's upset. She offers him the choice of eating and walking back, or not eating and riding the bus back. James knows that he's not only hungry, but also he's cold. He thinks about being back home, where Ty is laughing, and everybody is eating. His mother just tells him to start walking again. They are being pelted with heavy sleet, and James simply prays that the Lord won't let him die.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter emphasizes the difficult choices that poverty demands. James and his mother don't have enough money for bus fare and a lunch. They have to make a choice between eating and having transportation. James' mother has also taught him not to complain about his circumstances, that he has to be strong. His only recourse is not to mention how hungry or cold he is. He has learned to be stoic and hide his emotions. In doing so, he has learned to be a man and not a child. The contrast between home, which James associates with laughter and meals, and the cold of the outside world is continued as James and his mother walk the streets while they wait for the dentist. James "prays" to God, using the traditional religion, even though his prayers did not end his toothache earlier when he tried.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

James recognizes that he and his mother are walking back to the end of town where the colored people eat, but he's so cold he doesn't even care about eating. He just wants to be warm. If he keeps walking, he knows he'll get warm when he gets there. It's still sleeting, and James comments "the sky's gray." Since his mother isn't talking, he wonders if she's mad at him, but those thoughts make him think that he'll pick enough cotton this summer to get her a red coat. James wishes it could be summer all the time, but he knows they have to have winter no matter how much he hates it. He blows his nose without being told, and they keep on walking. They are the only two people on the street, and James hears his own teeth chattering as he wonders what they're doing at home.

Thinking about home reminds James that Monsieur Bayonne might be there playing guitar. One day, Ty had played with the guitar and broken a string, making Monsieur Bayonne angry. Ty, however, is a good mimic and makes everyone laugh. He just makes fun of Monsieur Bayonne when he's not there. James remembers how he and Ty and his Mama and his Daddy used to be happy, but it's not like that anymore. James thinks about Monsieur Bayonne saying that it isn't fair that his Daddy had to go away and that his Mama isn't given anything. His Auntie responds to Monsieur Bayonne by telling him that the children shouldn't hear him talk like that. His Auntie calls Monsieur Bayonne, "Etienne," and he calls her "Rose Mary." James' thoughts have kept him occupied while walking, and now he's relieved to see the cafy.

Chapter 11 Analysis

James' family is in financial difficulty, because his father is in the Army, and there is little or no financial help for them while he's gone, at least according to Monsieur Bayonne. Etienne appears to be a close family friend with a close relationship with Auntie Rose Mary. The departure of his father has dampened the family's exuberance and previous happiness. In the absence of his father, James takes on the role of provider, even thinking of how to purchase a new coat for his mother. James finds comfort in thoughts of home, and he continues to walk in silence, even though he is miserably cold. Monsieur Bayonne's comment about the unfairness of the system that asks a man to fight, but doesn't help his family, is one more example of the themes of inequity and hardship that run throughout the story.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

James and his mother arrive in the cafy, with James being happy just to be inside. He stands inside near the heater with his mother, whose coat smells like a wet dog. Both mother and son rub their hands in front of the heater, doing it because it keeps them from hurting if they get warm too fast. There's a man at the cafy counter, and a lady behind it. Both watch James and Octavia, while she counts the money she's carrying around, bundled in a handkerchief. James tells Octavia that he's not hungry, but she tells him that they have to pay for something, since they've used their heat. James doesn't want her to spend the money on him. Octavia pays and gets a plate of cakes, a glass of milk, and a cup of coffee. James' mother drinks her coffee, while he eats. James thinks Octavia looks sad, and he longs to tell her how he feels about her, and how he wants to make all this up to her. However, he can't, because his Mama doesn't like talk like that. Octavia refuses to eat any of the cakes, even though he knows she's hungry. James eats the cakes just on his front teeth so that it doesn't hurt his aching tooth.

The man who was sitting at the counter plays the jukebox and asks Octavia to dance. She gets up and grabs the man, pushing him against the wall. When he retaliates and comes back at her, she pulls her knife. James rushes to his mother's defense, but she calls him back. Octavia tells the man that she'll gut him if he comes at her again. The man returns to the counter, and the lady in back of the counter calls the man, "a pimp."

Chapter 12 Analysis

James' mother attends to James' needs by feeding him, even with their little bit of money. She sacrifices her own hunger to feed him. While she does not carry on lengthy conversations with her son or indulge in displays of emotion, her actions in trying to warm him and feed him, and in trying to ease the pain of his toothache, soften the emotional tension between them.

In the second major conflict of the story, a man in the cafy tries to manhandle Octavia. James' mother shows herself to be very tough and self-sufficient, the same qualities she's trying to teach James. Not only is she teaching James to be a man and deal with difficult situations, she is also demonstrating that she, as a mother without a man near to help her, can be tough. She will survive and fight for her dignity. One of the issues at the heart of the story, however, is how to survive and become an adult without losing the emotion and "heart" that makes us human. Octavia, like the young man in the dental waiting room, seems to have lost "heart." Both are tenacious survivors without expression of emotion. The way James and his mother warm up their hands, talking about how to rub them first so it doesn't hurt, shows that they've been cold before and

have had to deal with physical discomfort. This is a recurring theme exemplified in James' toothache, the bitter weather, and his acute hunger.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Octavia tells James to get his coat fastened. They leave the cafy immediately after the incident, even though the lady behind the counter says they don't have to go. Almost immediately after they begin walking, crossing the railroad tracks, James is cold again. He is hungry again, when he smells bread baking from a baker's shop. James closes his eyes to imagine the taste and runs himself into a telephone pole. His Mother grabs him and checks for injuries before letting him go. James thinks of other things to forget the cold. He remembers the poem "Annabel Lee," which he would have had to recite if he were in school. Thinking about it doesn't make him warm, though. Ahead of them, they see an older white lady dressed in black. The lady tells James and Octavia to stop and asks them whether they've eaten. His mother says they have, and when the lady asks if they're cold, Octavia replies that they're on their way to the dentist, and that they'll get warm there. The lady tells her that she'll call the dentist, Mr. Bassett, to let him know that they're on their way. She then ushers them into a store.

The store is a tiny place, and a man from the back calls to the woman. Her name is Helena, and his name is either Alnest or Ernest; James isn't sure. Helena tells Octavia that she has seen them go by and that she has tried to catch them before. She again asks James' mother if they've eaten, and she says "yes." As soon as Helena says that she's been keeping some food warm in the kitchen, Octavia turns to go until Helena says that James will have to work for it, since they don't give any handouts. James' mother tells Helena that they don't take any handouts, and agrees that James can work for Helena, who says that she needs to have her garbage cans taken around to the front. Alnest, (or Ernest) can't do it, because he's ill. Helena shows James the garbage cans, which he dutifully moves to the front of the house, even though they are not heavy at all. He starts to peek inside the can, because he believes its empty, but Helena calls him inside.

After washing up in a tiny but immaculate bathroom, James sits down with Octavia to eat a meal of rice with meat and gravy, some lettuce and tomato, and a glass of milk with cake. The old man calls out to Helena from the back room, asking if they're eating. Helena says they are, and the man says he's glad, because now Helena will stay inside. Helena calls Dr. Bassett's nurse and informs James' mother that the dentist will take them as soon as they get to the office. Both James and his mother thank Helena before leaving, and Alnest (or Ernest) calls out to them "Good-bye, both mother and son."

Just as James and his mother are leaving, Octavia asks Helena if they sell salt meat, and she gives Helena a quarter. Helena cuts off a large piece of the meat. Octavia tells her that the hunk of meat is too big for the amount of money she's paid and asks Helena to weigh it. When Helena balks, Octavia starts to leave. Helena reconsiders and cuts about half the slab off. Mama pays her the quarter, telling Helena that she will never forget her kindness. Helena continues to watch as Octavia and James walk away. It is

still sleeting heavily. James pulls his collar up around his neck, but Mama makes him put it back down, saying to him, "You not a bum. You a man."

Chapter 13 Analysis

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James and his mother are invited into the home of a woman who has been watching them through the windows. She opens her home to them. Helena is an elderly shopkeeper who lives in a tiny place with her ill husband, named Alnest or Ernest. Helena is kind and compassionate, recognizing that James and his mama don't have much, but that they're also proud and won't accept charity. She invents work for James to do, so that he and his mother can eat the food she has prepared for them. Helena alleviates the inequity and unfairness of Dr. Bassett's office by calling and making sure that the doctor will not make them wait any longer. Helena's actions demonstrate that there are people who care about others, that goodness does exist, and that racial color doesn't have to be a barrier between kindness and compassion.

The use of the elderly couple Alnest/Ernest and Helena provide a positive contrast to the preacher in the waiting room who hit the younger man. Helena and Alnest's/Ernest's home becomes a haven, mirroring James' own home and the comfort and security felt around people who care about you. The warmth of the Helena's store includes food, and is contrasted with the cold and hunger of the outside world.

James' mother is proud, refusing to take handouts or charity, believing that it's important to be self-sufficient and strong. She won't take any more meat than her quarter entitles her to purchase. While she probably understands that Helena is inventing work for James to do, Octavia also allows this to happen, because it is in the best interest of her son, who can now eat a decent meal. Octavia's hunger, too, is alleviated, but she wants to make sure to buy her salt pork from Helena, in order to pay her way. This is a repetition of the earlier scene in the cafy, where Olivia feels that they should pay to eat something at the cafy, because they have used its warmth. The lessons that she teaches James are never to complain or show emotion, to avoid charity handouts, pay your way, and to be proud. She instills a sense of dignity and worth in him even in the midst of struggle.

In view of the lessons Olivia teaches her son, her unemotional behavior and reticence (bordering on cruelty) toward him are understandable and almost noble. The ending of the story brings the thematic elements of the story together. The final line, where James' mother reminds him that he is a "man," illustrates that the young boy is being ushered into an early manhood because of his suffering. Octavia's comment (and her own behavior) emphasizes that to be a man, James must be proud and dignified, and that survival depends on his own actions in the face of adversity and pain.

The title, "The Sky is Gray," is a repetition of the scene in the dentist's office, where the young man proclaims that the "wind is pink," and the "grass is black." James, if he

follows the young man's advice, would question what color the sky really is, and whether his perceptions of the world are based on the imposed words of a white society, or whether there are some realities, like cold and hunger, that are tangible and not open to interpretation or questioning.

Characters

Alnest

On one hand, Alnest is little more than an offstage voice, the voice of an old man cautioning Helena, his wife, against the cold. On the other, he is one of only two sympathetic white characters in Gaines's story (Helena is the other). Though the motivation for their careful charity is not described, it is ultimately accepted, the suggestion being that whatever their motivation may be, their small generosity will only be accepted as kindness, not as charity.

Auntie

Like James and James's mother, the source for James's aunt is drawn from Gaines's own experience, modeled after his own great aunt, Augustine Jefferson. Though her presence in "The Sky is Gray" is minimal, Augustine's presence in Gaines's life can hardly be overstated: "Unless you include her," he says, "you can't write about me at all."

Dr. Bassett

Kept completely offstage except for his terrifying effect on Little John Lee, who screams bloody murder on receipt of his dental ministrations, Dr. Basset exists in the narrative not for what he is, but for what he isn't—Dr. Robillard, the good dentist who takes care of the teeth of Bayonne's whites.

Monsieur Bayonne

Monsieur Bayonne at the story's beginning is the superstitious complement to the preacher in the middle section. He is a sincerely religious faith healer/musician, but his religion is heavily tinged with superstition. For example, he believes that Catholic and non-Catholic prayers heal differently, but one suspects that the distinction between the two would be lost on the clergy of both Catholic and Protestant faiths. Based on Gaines' own experience, the character of Monsieur Bayonne is a mildly unsympathetic but still dangerous figure—though he acts without malice, his actions keep James from a dentist for several days.

The Boy

See The Student

Daddy

A strong offstage presence, James's father is most profound in his absence. It is because of his absence that Octavia's moral teachings are both so important and so urgently imparted.

Helena

Alnest's wife, Helena is the story's other sympathetic white figure. But she is important for another reason besides her human decency: it is paradoxically her kind gesture that represents the greatest potential threat to James's manhood, at least in his mother's eyes.

James

The story's protagonist, or main character, James is a young boy of about eight who lives with his mother, aunt, and their immediate family in the outskirts of Bayonne, Louisiana. It is through James's eyes that the story is told; consequently, the story is heavily filtered through his sensibilities. James is on the cusp between youth and adolescence, trying to understand what is expected of him by his inscrutable mother as he enters this next phase of his life.

Mama

See Octavia

Octavia

James's mother Octavia is a strong, proud, uncompromising woman largely based on Gaines's own mother. Indeed, one of the story's more disturbing episodes, during which his mother tries to make James kill two captured birds, is drawn from Gaines's own experience. She feels her first duty to her children is to toughen them up and show them how to live and survive. She loves her children, but more important to her than any visible demonstrations of affection are the moral lessons she insists upon teaching James.

The old lady

See Helena

The old man

See Alnest

The Preacher

Like Monsieur Bayonne, the Preacher is little more than a foil—he exists only to become angered by the student on behalf of the other people in the dentist's office, to strike him on their behalf, and to pity him.

The Student

The student, or the boy, is somewhat out of place in this story, but was certainly not out of place at the time the story was written. Like the narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the student is profoundly alienated from his community. In the microcosm of black society represented by the dentist's office that morning, he offers an indictment of religion and of its opiate-like effect on the downtrodden that Gaines himself seems to share.

Themes

Change and Transformation

The overarching theme in this story is change and transformation. In physical terms, there is motion from one pole to its opposite: from warm, to cold, to warm again; from beyond the outskirts of Bayonne to the city and back again; from the doctor's office to the street, and to the office again, and so on. From a larger, more global viewpoint, these motions support and underscore James's own transformation. James, who begins the story as a boy more conscious of his feelings and inner life than of the world in which he lives, moves far along the path toward understanding the moral complexity of adulthood and of being "a man" in the course of the single day.

Civil Rights

Though the events in this story take place well before what is commonly called the Civil Rights era, one cannot read "The Sky is Gray" without a keen awareness that the writer is writing at the historical moment during which the Civil Rights movement exploded onto the national stage and that, surprisingly, given this context, the story somehow manages to describe but not to overplay the protagonists' suffering in terms of prejudice and inequality. While the prejudice James and his mother encounter is real and unarguable, the response of James's mother presages the essence of Martin Luther King's message that salvation begins in the person of the oppressed, not the oppressor.

Class Inequality

Only slightly less prominent than the theme of Civil Rights is class inequality. While many argue that the difference between races is less substantive than the difference between the classes, class inequality clearly takes a back seat to racial inequality in Gaines's fiction. While James and his mother would certainly have had an easier day if they had had enough money to own a car—to drive to the dentist's office, to perhaps stop and do some shopping and have lunch on the way, perhaps even to see Dr. Robillard instead of Dr. Bassett—the simple fact remains that to do so, they would have had to be not only financially comfortable, but also white.

Coming of Age

"The Sky is Gray" is fundamentally a story about the process of coming of age, of going from one state to another. The reader only sees a small part of this process, a few hours one morning, a few more that afternoon, but these hours are important: they form some of the bedrock upon which the foundation of James's manhood—his sense of personal dignity and worth, as well as courage and silence in difficulty—will be built. Gaines

creates these moments with sufficient force and clarity both to explain his protagonist's past and to anticipate his future.

God and Religion; Knowledge and Ignorance

In thematic terms, two of the most important sections in the story—sections seven and eight—explore the relationship between God, religion, knowledge, and ignorance. On one side is a heretical young black student who has not only renounced his religious beliefs but argues that "words like Freedom, Liberty, God, White, Colored" are meaningless.

"Words," he says, "mean nothing. One means nothing more than the other.... Action is the only thing. Doing. That's the thing." In the communal microcosm of the doctor's office he represents the defiance, the nonviolent non-cooperation of the Civil Rights movement that would sweep through the South thirty years later. In Gaines's words, describing the type of person he depicts in the student to Carl Wooton in an interview reprinted in *Porch Talk*: "you will have this rebellion against authority. You have these kids, you know: I'll stick a goddamned needle in my arm, I'll sniff coke, to hell with anybody telling me what to do. Can I get a job tomorrow? Can I live here tomorrow? Well, if I can't, to hell with it. I'll take coke, or I'll use any kind of profanity, I don't give a damn." On the other side are the preacher and the other woman the young man speaks to after the preacher departs. They are unwilling, or unable, to follow his line of reasoning, for to accept that the signification of green or black has no intrinsic relationship to a Platonic ideal of green or black, but signifies by consensus only, comes perilously close to accepting that the other words about which the young man seems to care even more than God—freedom and liberty—are empty of meaning unless they signify the same thing to speakers both black and white.

Style

Point of View

"The Sky is Gray" is told entirely from the point of view of the eight-year old narrator, James. Consequently, the reader is limited to what James observes and understands. Though he can accurately recall the words of the student in the dentist's office that lead up to the student being hit by the preacher, he cannot understand the argument in which they are engaged ("She just looks at him like she don't know what he's talking 'bout. I know I don't."). The limitations imposed on the narrative by an eight-year-old narrator are more obvious when he tries, unsuccessfully, to understand his mother's frequent mood changes or her mysterious decisions to fight or flee at each of the stations of mood the narrative visits.

But what the narrative loses from one hand it gains in the other. James is sympathetic without being an object of sympathy; the reader feels his cold, his confusion, his hunger directly, authentically, without the intrusion of another character or narrator's impressions or observations. And when, at the story's conclusion, his mother pronounces him a man, the reader who has been inside James's subjective world can take measure of both how far he still is from manhood and of what he has learned from the lessons meant to take him the rest of the way there.

Episodic Form

"The Sky is Gray" is episodic in form—that is, the story is not told as a sequence of events, but as a sequence of events punctuated by narrative flash-backs and broken up into numbered segments. The effect of the story's episodic discontinuity is to emphasize the particular moment James is living, whether he is reliving a memory or moving through present events, while de-emphasizing the story's overarching structure. The advantages of episodic form, when relating the experiences of a young boy, are obvious, and have been used with great success in works as different as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. The greatest advantage of an episodic form is that it allows the author to follow the protagonist, or main character, from one important event to another without recording all the unimportant events in between. This is particularly useful in a story limited by the narrative point of view to the description of a young person's inner life.

Bildungsroman

"The Sky is Gray" is a *bildungsroman,* a story describing the growth of a child into adulthood. Of course, the reader doesn't follow James all the way from childhood into adulthood, but the central premise of *bildungsroman* is that the reader watches the protagonist go from innocence to experience—in this case, from being a child whose primary interest is in staying warm and well-fed to a youth who has the first glimmerings

of pride in himself and awareness of an important and external reality: that others will judge him not by what he is, but by how he appears to be. In this transformation, as he puts his collar down, the reader has taken a small but important step with James from childhood to adulthood.

Historical Context

Gaines's story is meant as more than an entertainment; it is meant as a critique of the racial injustice he experienced as a boy made vivid again by a visit to Louisiana in 1968. Understanding "The Sky is Gray" requires that one not only understand something about the Louisiana of the 1930s and 1940s but also understand what was happening with regard to race in the United States during the 1960s, because the events of what later came to be called "the Civil Rights era" made a substantial and lasting impression on Gaines, one that can be seen not too far beneath the surface of "The Sky is Gray" in the person of the student and in the story's preoccupation with racial inequality.

While precisely dating the start of an era is difficult, most agree that the beginning of the Civil Rights era can be dated to John F. Kennedy's election in 1961 as this country's 35th and youngest President, and with the United Nation's decision that same year to condemn the South African *apartheid*. Two years later, in 1963, the conflicts began in earnest, with riots and acts of racial brutality against demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama, culminating with Martin Luther King's being jailed in Birm-ingham. In response, later that year, 200,000 Americans, black and white, joined together in a "freedom march on Washington" to demonstrate. But the American consciousness was jolted away from these events by Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963, and by events abroad, principal among these being the escalation of what would become the Viet Nam war.

It is important to recall that the Civil Rights era coincided with the casting off of imperial control by a series of African countries. In 1964, for example, Zanzibar and Tanganyika came together to form Tanzania, expelling a sultinate, while Zambia was formed out of Northern Rhodesia's ashes by Ken-neth Kaunda the same year that Kenya became a republic under Jomo Kenyatta. Also in 1964, a white minority in Southern Rhodesia elected as Premiere, Ian Smith, under whose leadership Rhodesia managed to postpone representative government for another two decades. Overall, however, the move away from colonial entanglements was stronger than the ties that bound African countries to their colonial powers, and the move toward home rule was unstoppable. This did not go unnoticed in the United States, particularly among black leaders who read with interest books like Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya.*

In 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York and outbreaks of anti-black violence occurred in Selma, Alabama, including Ku Klux Klan shootings and Martin Luther King leading a procession of 4,000 in a protest march from Selma to Montgomery. In Los Angeles, race riots in Watts resulted in 35 deaths, the arrest of 4,000, and $40 million in property damage. In 1968, the same year that Gaines's *Bloodline* was published, Reverend Martin Luther King himself was assassinated in a Memphis hotel.

Critical Overview

Critics have been kind to Gaines, but his reputation has not risen with such meteoric speed as have the reputations of some of the other contemporary black writers of his generation. In the introduction to *Ernest Gaines,* Valerie Babb's biography of Gaines through the lens of his work, Babb writes, "taken as a whole, Gaines's canon represents a blending of Louisiana, African-American, and universal human experience. His writings reproduce the communal nature of storytelling in his rural parish while accenting the historicity that joins members of the African-American diaspora to larger American society. By recording and preserving his people's culture in his literature, Gaines creates both an ongoing memorial to a vanishing way of life and an enduring testament to human concerns."

Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooton share many of Babb's observations, particularly with regard to the importance of dignity under strain and courage. In their introduction to *Porch Talk with Ernest Gaines: Conversations on the Writer's Craft* they write: "Gaines's characters evoke laughter, joy, despair, grief, anger, sympathy, and—perhaps most of all—pride. Whatever their struggles, their successes and failures, they move toward a perception of their dignity." Describing the events that led to the set of oral interviews which comprise *Porch Talk* they write "through our association with him we have discovered that dignity and pride are not only themes that pervade his art, but qualities that characterize him as a teacher and a man."

John Lowe, editor of *Conversations with Er-nest Gaines* provides a somewhat more rounded, though still uniformly laudatory, response to Gaines's works. He states that Gaines was "shockingly underrated" at the beginning of his career. Some of the reasons for what Lowe considers the unfair "obscur[ity of] Gaines gifts" are that Gaines writes about "a largely rural community, isolated by both its southernness and its special Louisiana qualities, which it is true make it exotic, but at the same time somewhat inaccessible, even for many African Americans." Another reason Lowe cites for Gaines neglect "is his refusal to cater to stereotypes." He states that although people expect stories set in Louisiana to take place in New Orleans, Gaines has never set one there. And since his stories are set in the past, his African-American characters appear subservient and are not placed in the "revolutionary poses favored by some of Gaines's contemporaries such as James Baldwin, Ishmael Reed, John O. Killins, John Wideman, or David Bradley."

In sum, while Gaines may not have had the wide recognition of other African-American writers early in his career, there is a broad critical consensus that he is an important writer, a good writer, and a writer who has perhaps been undervalued and may continue to gain increasing recognition in the years to come, in part because he was somewhat overshadowed by his contemporaries during his early years, in part because of the increasing importance of studies of masculinity in the literary canon. As Gaudet and Wooton point out, "Gaines has come to the fore in many critical studies lately because of his searching appraisal of the masculine search for identity, particularly that of African-American men."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

David Kippen is a doctoral candidate in world literature with an emphasis on the literature of southern Africa. In the following essay, Kippen explores the implications of a moral reading of Gaines's "The Sky is Gray."

Though Gaines's works invite a wide number of readings, almost all current criticism can be divided into one of two broad categories: race-centered criticism, concerned primarily with the story's instructive value about such things as prejudice and injustice, and structural criticism, which describes the parts of the story and their relation to the whole in formal, rather than thematic, terms. Not surprisingly, the lion's share of critiques fall into the first camp, and even the structural readings include didactic (instructive) digressions in almost every case. Such readings all share a serious, albeit unintentional, flaw; they suggest that one must understand all actions and most events as direct or indirect consequences of race, rather than individual choice. The drawback to what I'll call, for lack of a better term, "race-based" readings may not be immediately obvious, but isn't terribly complicated. Reading Gaines first, foremost, always, and only as a black author, an author of race and race issues, rather than primarily as an imaginative author, an author of ideas, delimits the kinds of questions one can ask about his works and necessarily diminishes the reader's appreciation of the imaginative sphere in which he works. In short, the unfortunate consequence of exclusively race-based readings is that they narrow the reader's scope of inquiry, inviting the reader to ask fewer questions and questions of a more particular nature than one would ask of an author like James Joyce, Salman Rushdie, or J. M. Coetzee—each of whose writings are intimately concerned with different conceptions of "race" and their ramifications. Though it is indeed difficult, particularly for Americans, to step far enough back from the late 20th century American present to see the world Gaines describes with the same dispassionate clarity as one might see the Ireland, India, or South Africa that Joyce, Rushdie, and Coetzee respectively describe, nothing is lost—and much is gained—if one makes the effort. In short, what is missing from the current crop of responses to Gaines is a moral reading, one that doesn't look for causes and effects in a two-dimensional equation of character and color, but rather, in the quality of the characters' thoughts and actions, regarding the characters not as caricatures of different types, but as fully formed people with their own—to borrow a phrase from Joyce—"individuating rhythms." If Gaines is indeed an imaginative writer of canonical status, his works will reward such readings.

It is not possible, within the scope of this essay, to survey all of Gaines's works, or to make more than a cursory pass through "The Sky is Gray." It is also not possible, in a discussion of what I'm calling moral readings, to avoid some necessary oversimplifications of the complex issues surrounding and clouding the idea of race. But this much is clear. Gaines writings about Louisiana have been understood and responded to largely as writings about race. It is also clear that race, racial injustice, the years of segregation, and the particular way these things play themselves out in rural Louisiana are central to Gaines's writing and therefore are central to understanding his works. Less clear, because less attention has been paid to this question, is how much is

left when race is left out or made irrelevant to the readers. Put another way, if Gaines's stories were set in the India of 1946, two years before partition, if the primary groups described were Muslim and Hindu, rather than black and white, would the stories still merit reading? This is neither a subjective nor an unimportant question.

"The Sky is Gray" is told in the first person by an eight-year-old child, James, on the cusp of youth, and describes a half-day in James's life. His narrative begins as he and his mother wait for a bus to take them to a dentist's office where James is to have his tooth pulled and ends that same day, sometime shortly before (the reader presumes) that tooth is finally pulled. Told in a series of thirteen more or less chronological episodes, James's narrative is punctuated by frequent flashbacks to past events, each of which provide the reader with a more complete picture of the moral forces pulling at and shaping James. What makes the fact of James's narration worth remarking upon is that Gaines could have chosen to tell the story from a number of different perspectives. He could have told it through the eyes of James's mother Octavia, or Val; he could have told it in epistolary form (as a letter) from James's mother to his father; or from an omniscient perspective, one that allowed him to describe the sensory and sentient world from all of these vantage points in turn. But instead, Gaines allows James to tell his story in his own words. This is puzzling, because a child's perspective is considerably narrower than an adult's. What might be complex, three-dimensional people with equally complex motivations threaten to become two-dimensional caricatures with obscure, even uninteresting motivations when seen through the eyes of a child. Moreover, while an adult may be judged on the basis of his or her thoughts and actions, a child is still too completely a product of his or her parents to evaluate as an independent being. Whatever the narrative gains by being told through James's eyes would need to add a great deal to offset these drawbacks. But James's narration creates a rationale for reading the story as a moral story. Though still a child, James is on the verge of youth. One might therefore argue that the real story is yet to be told, that it cannot be told until we see the boy as a man. But the counter to this argument is that one should, if Gaines is successful, be able to see how James will turn out, that the creation of a characterization sufficient to demonstrate that the child is father of the man is a demonstration of a naturalism like Zola's, and worthy of similar respect. And by the end of the story, the reader does indeed sense that there has been some change to who James is in that short span, a sense reinforced by his mother's assertion that he is not a bum, but a man.

The distinction his mother makes between men and bums is both subtle and significant: bums pull their coat collars up, while men don't. What this suggests is that in the highly polarized world in which James is growing up, external appearance can be more significant that internal reality—after all, whether James's collar is up or down, he's clearly not a bum, but a boy, and even a man can be permitted, under conditions as cold as those James and Octavia find themselves in, to pull his collar up around his throat. If one's analysis of this scene stops here in attempting to understand this odd end point for the story, the reading which suggests itself is quite straightforward, something like, "external appearance is essential because James's person will always be identified and understood first by his external blackness, then, perhaps, if he is lucky, by his innate character by the world in which he lives, a world in which the white gaze is

the most significant threat a black man faces." This reading is reinforced by other stations in the text, and indeed, most critics have read James and Octavia as I've suggested. For example, in *Ernest Gaines* Valerie Babb writes:

Unable to buy food because of their poverty, and forbidden to enter the warm shelters in the area of the dentist's office because of their color, they become rambling outcasts in a society in which the whim of any white is empowered to affect their destiny. While they wait for the dentist to reopen his office, Octavia must devise ways in which she can keep James from the cold and at the same time carefully adhere to strict rules of racial separation. Observing his mother manipulate their environment moves James closer to what will be his particular entry into manhood, the psychic freedom that comes from emotional self-mastery. In one instance Octavia enters a white-owned hardware store and pretends to inspect ax handles for purchase while James heats himself at the wood stove. Her dissembling enables her to warm him without compromising her dignity by begging the proprietor to allow her son use of the stove. Here, hiding her true feelings and motives, she makes use of the technique of "masking" and teaches her son a valuable lesson in pride and survival.

But if one takes a step back from the more obvious reading another, more subtle, reading begins to emerge. Consider, for example, the contradiction in Babb's representation of Octavia as on the one hand trying to "keep James from the cold" while "adher[ing] to strict rules of racial separation," but on the other being "enabled" by her "dissembling" to keep him warm "without compromising her dignity." Exactly what is keeping James cold, one wonders—"strict rules of racial separation," or Octavia's uncompromised dignity? Babb can't decide. Babb would have Octavia read as a woman whose prideful "dissembling" and "technique of 'masking'," whatever that entails, are the necessary consequence of living in a dangerous world in which "the whim of any white is empowered to affect their destiny." But this is a significant, even inexcusable oversimplification of Octavia's motivations. Clearly, if the environment in which they found themselves was as dangerous as Babb suggests, with every white potentially disposed to do harm, Octavia's lesson would be the worst example she could possibly give James, setting him up at some future date for a prideful miscalculation whose outcome could be fatal. It is both more reasonable and more in keeping with Gaines's own views on the importance of dignity to read Octavia as *intentionally withholding warmth* from James to teach him that the value of their personal dignity is greater than the value of the most basic comforts—being warm and well-fed.

The importance of this distinction is difficult to overstate: it is nothing less than the difference between a story about people living in perpetual victimhood, on one hand, or a story about a mother trying to teach her son what it will take to become the sort of man she will respect, on the other. If one reverts to the easiest sort of race-based reading, one will invariably decide to read the story as one about victimhood. If that is the reading one chooses, the more important, more striking, more interesting story disappears, while James and his mother become nothing more than sympathetic but uninteresting racial stereotypes about the lives of poor blacks long ago. But if one decides to read the story as a more complex critique, not of racial relations, but of the

value—and the cost—of dignity, one sees that even as an eight-year-old James understands her, Octavia is an interesting, fully-realized character.

Babb seems to approach this realization when she writes that Octavia's "dissembling enables her to warm him without compromising her dignity by begging." Babb realizes that Octavia's act is fundamentally about dignity, not about warmth, but she doesn't think through the implications of the point she has made, here or later. For Babb, Octavia's intention is to "teach her son a valuable lesson in pride and survival," but she doesn't interrogate the relationship between pride and survival, preferring tacitly to assume that her readers will infer a necessary relationship between the two where none in fact exists. But assume for a moment that Octavia's world is not so simple. Though her family is clearly poor, it is evident that they have learned to function within the constraints of their poverty. James tries to keep silent about his tooth not out of fear, but because he knows how expensive it will be to have a dentist pull it. Later, the whole family is at hand when Octavia and James's aunt count out the cost of a trip to the dentist: "She say: 'enough to get there and get back. Dollar and a half to have it pulled. Twenty-five for me to go, twenty-five for him. Twenty-five for me to come back, twenty-five for him. Fifty cents left. guess I get a little piece of salt meat with that."' Though it is clear that money is scarce, it is just as clear that this family knows how to survive with dignity—that is, without charity. The great fear here is not the capriciousness of white townfolk, but of being beholden, as a result of their poverty, to anyone. And a reading focussed exclusively on the story's racial dynamic misses this completely.

Source: David Y. Kippen, "An Overview of 'The Sky is Gray'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group,1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Meyer describes how "The Sky is Gray" is a coming of age story not just about coming to terms with growing up, but also dealing with the sensual orientation of one's body. He looks at two contrasting ideas, the African/aural roots—the idea that African Americans express themselves through their music and aural interpretations—and their American/visual reorientation—the idea that America is a country of visual stimulations, that as Emerson said "the eye is final."

Each of the first two stories in Ernest J. Gaines's *Bloodline*—"A Long Day in November" and "The Sky Is Gray" —describes a black boy or youth attempting to come to terms not just with the world in which he lives, his parents' problems, and the racism which circumscribes him but, more importantly, with the sensory orientation of his own body, the struggle between what William Faulkner called a "black blood and white blood." It is this private or internal struggle more than any public or external debate that creates the real identity crisis for the young black and for the artist or writer who would contend with an America which has "painted the senses white!" Both Sonny in "A Long Day in November" and James in "The Sky Is Gray" have to resolve the conflict between their African/aural roots and their American/visual reorientation—between James Baldwin's declaration that "it is only in his music . . . that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story" and Ralph Waldo Emerson's assumption that "the eye is final; what it tells us is the last stroke of nature; beyond color we cannot go." This hyperverbal/hypervisual trauma or *rite de passage* forms the real theme or subject of both black children's accounts in "A Long Day in Novem-ber" and "The Sky Is Gray." . . .

James, in "The Sky is Gray," is a somewhat older black youth who rightly faces a more complex dilemma concerning his ear and eye. The absence of the father—"in the army"—has somewhat prematurely forced James into the role of "the man of the house"; and we first find this young black initiate "*looking* down the road," of American hypervisuality. Here, James must learn to balance the words of his black heritage with the visions of white America—must learn to observe his mother's sadness and poverty while at the same time controlling his words after the fashion of the stoic adult black male: "I want put my arm round her and tell her. But I'm not supposed to do that. She say that's weakness and crybaby stuff." Time and time again, the black youth must simply "take it"—must see the advantages of the whites or the sufferings of himself and other blacks—while saying nothing and offering no complaints. Indeed, the "tooth" with the aching root here is James's own Afro-American tongue and ear—the dilemma of finding that his deepest "roots" are at odds with hypervisual America. The text of "The Sky Is Gray" subtly brings out this painful aurality: I'd just lay there and *listen* to them, and *listen* to that wind out there, and *listen* to that fire in the fireplace. Sometimes it'd stop long enough to let me get little rest. Sometimes it just *hurt, hurt, hurt.* Lord, have mercy (italics mine). This tooth of endless remorse/aurality may be denied—"It ain't hurting me no more"—but will never be extracted from the central black consciousness of "The Sky Is Gray." Of course, too, there is a shrewd and even humorous irony involved in attempting to exorcise the black hyperverbality by "prayer"—whether this be Baptist or Catholic incantation—for the Word/word, spoken or sung, lies at the root of

black religiosity. Yet James, for all his acuteness of perception, can never follow Emerson into the parody of the Biblical command, "Pray without ceasing": the New-England sage demands, "*Observe* without ceasing" (italics mine). The only way that James can truly understand his world is by authoritarian explanation—the tongue and ear forming the eye: "Auntie and Monsieur Bayonne *talked* to me and made me *see*" (italics mine).

The trip to town on the bus marked "White" and "Colored" represents the real *rite de passage* for the black youth in white America—the blurring of his sensibilities into gray: "The river is gray. The sky is gray." From henceforth, James's own "long day" will be comprised of this struggle between "black blood" and "white blood" within a cerebral "sky" of "gray"—a terrifying and chilling confrontation with one's own senses and sensibilities. The first thing that James learns is to rein in his potential visuality—to accept verbal blinders for his eyes: "Mama *tells* me to keep my eyes in front where they belong" (italics mine). Next, James discovers that the dentist's "colored" waiting-room is a place of intensified vocality and aurality, where patients are "hollering like pigs under a gate" and where "all round the room people are talking. Here, the key episode occurs between the "liberal" black student and the "conservative" black preacher—a paradoxical conflict between Word and word, between faith and sight. The black student demands hypervisuality—"*Show* me one reason to believe in the existence of a God" (italics mine)—while at the same time demanding a reinterrogation of is verbality: "What do *words* like Freedom, Liberty, God, White, Colored mean?" (italics mine). The student wants very much to deny his aurality—"Me, I don't listen to my heart"— and he ends up sad and depressed over his liberalism and scepticism: "I hope they aren't all like me . . . I was born too late to believe in your God." What the student desires is a new age for American blacks—one which can blend "faith" with "sight," the "ear" with the "eye," one's internal "blackness" with the surrounding "whiteness" into "The Sky Is *Gray*." James is acute enough to sense a kindred dilemma and thinks to himself: "When I grow up I want to be just like him."

Again, Gaines is shrewd enough not to let James end his ordeal at this point but forces him to confront the obstacles of bitter cold and hunger in order to accomplish his sensory *rite de passage.* Being told that he must return after lunch, James goes with his mother out into the sleeting streets of Bayonne. He *hears* his mother complain—"We the wrong color"—and he *sees* for himself the relative comfort of the "white people" eating in a nearby cafe. This time the trial is so severe that the verbal command is ineffectual: "Mama tells me keep my eyes in front where they belong, *but I can't help from seeing*" (italics mine). Nor can the mother's demands for stoicism keep James from nearly succumbing to the piercing chill of the sleeting "gray sky." At this point, almost by *deus ex machina,* the black youth's deepest self reasserts itself in all its visceral aurality: "My stomach growls and I suck it in to keep Mama from hearing it . . . It growls so loud you can *hear it a mile.*" Moreover, it soon becomes clear that the black mother and son must accept the fact that they have now become the observed, not the observers—that they are the ones who dearly need to be seen for what they are, cold and hungry. An elderly white woman and store-owner declares, "I saw y'all each time you went by." The blacks, now realizing they are not going to conquer the keen-eyed compassion of this woman and her husband, bow and accept food and a perhaps-too-generous supply of

"salt meat" under the transparent pretense of James's doing some "chores" for the shopkeepers. The blacks then leave the store under the kindly but acute "genius in America, with tyrannous eye": James recounts how "she's still there *watching* us" (italics mine).

All in all, the only pride that can be salvaged at the conclusion of the story is the black mother's verbal assurance—"You not a bum"—and the visual accommodation whereby James "turns down the collar" of his coat in order to appear as an *Afro-American* or newly reconstituted *hyperaural/ hypervisual* "man." This is what the black student in the dentist's office had desired—the best of both cultures, of ear and eye. But the question remains whether or not in this blending of "black" and "white" into "The Sky Is *Gray*" there still may be too great a personal pain and sense of loss or self-betrayal for black youth or artist ever to transcend Gunnar Myrdal's penetrating observation: "The colored peoples are excluded from assimilation."

O Say, Can *YOU* See that in one's "bloodline" one may indeed rediscover the "wise blood" of his or her deepest cultural and aesthetic self?

Source: William E. H. Meyer, Jr., "Ernest J. Gaines and the Black Child's Sensory Dilemma," in *College Language Association Journal,* Vol. 34, No. 4, June, 1991, pp. 414-25.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Roberts looks at the communal bonds found in Southern black communites, especially those as described by Gaines in "The Sky is Gray." Along with this, he describes the dangers inherent in a community where tradition and change interact.

The interaction between the community and the individual, along with its role in the shaping of human personality, is a primary concern of Ernest J. Gaines in much of his fiction. It is in probing the underlying community attitudes, values, and beliefs to discover the way in which they determine what an individual will or has become that Gaines gives poignancy to the pieces in his short-story collection *Bloodline.* Because his fiction focuses on the peculiar plight of black Americans in the South, Gaines must consider an additional level of significance—the strong communal bonds characteristic of Southern black folk culture. In these stories, black folk culture, with its emphasis on community-defined values and behaviors, shows signs of deterioration, while Western individualism and the development of more personally-defined values appear as catalysts in the demise of the black folk world view. In such a cultural climate, the spiritual and emotional well-being of both the community and the individual is threatened. Faced with the necessity to act and finding traditional solutions no longer viable, the characters in Gaines's stories struggle desperately to restore some semblance of normalcy to their worlds. The dramatic conflict endemic to the stories in *Bloodline* arises out of the efforts of various characters to reconcile their individual needs with community prerequisites. Two of the stories in *Bloodline,* "A Long Day in November" and "The Sky Is Gray," are particularly illustrative of the conflict between community perspective and individual needs. The conflict in these two stories further illustrates the importance of the changes taking place within Southern black culture to the development of the social consciousness of children. While the action of the stories revolves around two young boys, the resolution of the conflict resides with their parents....

The feeling of community which permeates "A Long Day in November"—that sense that whatever happens to Amy and Eddie is everybody's concern—is conspicuously absent from the second story in *Bloodline,* "The Sky Is Gray." James, the eight-year-old narrator of this story, struggles to understand his mother and her conceptions of manhood and dignity without aid from the community. With the exception of Auntie and Mr. Bayonne, who attempt to explain his mother's cold, dispassionate treatment of him on one occasion, James is alienated in his effort to come to grips with both the social and personal forces governing his life. The source of James's isolation is his mother Octavia, who moves through the world of the story with a calm and control which always seem on the verge of eruption. She has cut herself completely off from the community which conceivably could have provided her with support while her husband does his tour of duty in the army. Although her relationship with this absent husband is only briefly mentioned, one senses in her attitude and behavior that his departure left her vulnerable. As a result, she has made protecting James from becoming vulnerable her

primary goal in life. The problem in the story arises not so much from her efforts to make James a "man" as from her approach to and definition of manhood.

In her efforts to make James a "man," Octavia apparently believes that she has only her own behavior and attitude toward life to offer as a model. To project an image of invulnerability for James, she alienates herself from the community and deals with her world on an individualistic level. The community, presumably, offers no such model. Taking what she has—her pride and her poverty— she moves toward her goal of inculcating in James a sense of independence and dignity in self undeterred by offers of kindness and generosity. However, because she never explains her motives to him, she presents James with a world filled with extremes which endangers his realization of the manhood she attempts to force prematurely on him. The "gray" of the sky which hangs threateningly over the action of the story symbolizes the dangers inherent in the extremes which James must reconcile. While "gray" literally represents the harmonious blending of black and white, its use in the story to describe the sky before a brewing storm symbolizes a potentially destructive force. The force implicit in the story is Octavia's individualism, which threatens to deprive James of membership in the human community.

The dangers that her approach poses to James are dramatically illustrated in the argument between a minister and a student in the dentist's office, the scene of much of the action. The argument between the men focuses on the existence of God. The minister accepts God unquestioningly, while the student rejects God because belief in Him alleviates the need to question:

"Show me one reason to believe in the existence of a God," the boy says.

"My heart tells me," the preacher says.

"'My heart tells me,'" the boy says. "'My heart tells me.' Sure, 'My heart tells me.' And as long as you listen to what your heart tells you, you will have only what the white man gives you and nothing more. Me, I don't listen to my heart. The purpose of the heart is to pump blood throughout the body, and nothing else."

Whereas the minister clings to the traditional religious value of faith, the student espouses the development of more individualistic values based on reasoning and logic.

During the exchange between the men, the minister exposes the weakness of his position when he becomes frustrated and strikes the student. Through his action, he admits that the emotional or "heart" position leads to a cul de sac; it cannot be defended rationally. On the other hand, the student maintains a defensible position, but his egotistical stance exposes his feelings of alienation from his community. His father, we're told, is dead, and his mother is in a charity ward with a serious illness. Futhermore, he is forced to "wash dishes at night" to finance his education. Consequently, his feelings of isolation cause him to alienate himself from the emotional support and comfort of the members of his community, whom he, in turn, deprives of the

benefits of his education. His feelings of isolation are clearly illustrated in his conversation with a woman who attempts to take his side in the disagreement. Rather than explaining his position to her in such a way that she will be able to understand it, he raises his argument to a metaphysical level and alienates her:

"You really don't believe in God?" the lady says.

"No," he says.

"But why?" the lady says.

"Because the wind is pink," he says.

"What?" the lady says.

The boy don't answer her no more. He just reads in his book.

Although he claims to have a solution for the black community, he refuses to consider its level of comprehension. Consequently, in attempting to communicate with the community, he feels frustration, which reinforces his belief in his own isolation.

Octavia's skepticism and self-imposed isolation place her in a similarly antagonistic stance toward the community. Although her primary goal is to project a model of strength for James through her own actions, her inability to make *her* sense of the world comprehensible to *him* leaves James vulnerable to the very forces from which she would shield him. By forcing James to sublimate his emotions and accept them as signs of human weakness, she fails to provide him with a means of dealing with the emotional responses of others in a way consistent with her philosophy. James's vulnerability to this aspect of human nature is illustrated in the episode with an old couple who offer them food during their visit to town. James does not betray the kind and heartfelt offer of the couple although his mother would want him to. He responds to the emotional intent of the act. It is through these kinds of moderating forces in James' environment that Gaines sees his salvation.

Although Octavia does not operate from the same level of awareness that the student does, it is strongly implied that her attitude stems from perceptions and conscious choices made as a result of her husband's army duty. She uses her new awareness to structure her world into clear-cut oppositional units. Her final statement to James in the story is probably the most illustrative of her world view: "'You not a bum,' she says. 'You a man.'" While this is the nature of Octavia's world, it does not completely define the contours of the world with which James must come to terms. Human existence does not lend itself to such neat categorizing. Contrary to what Octavia would have him believe, the choices that James must eventually make about the quality of his existence should not be between "bum" and "man," or between adhering to the dictates of the "head" or "heart" as advocated by the student and the minister respectively. His choices should involve a conscious effort to integrate the extremes. However, for the moment, James is

literally and figuratively caught in the middle of a storm in which both social and personal forces threaten his well-being.

The symbolic significance of the "gray sky" is the key to an understanding of the complexity of the issue raised in the story. To see "gray" merely as the integration of black and white on a literal level, and as a metaphor for racial integration on a symbolic level is, I think, to misunderstand Gaines's real intent in the story. As the argument between the student and minister in the dentist's office clearly illustrates, there is a racial dimension present in the story. But the conflict goes much deeper than that. It also involves the problem of integrating the individual and the community in a mutually rewarding relationship in the face of dehumanizing individualistic forces. In this case, consciousness raising of blacks should not lead to an alienation from the community as it has for the student and Octavia; it should provide the basis for bettering the community.

In both "A Long Day in November" and "The Sky Is Gray," Gaines involves the reader in the dilemma faced by individuals who find traditional folk values inadequate to meet their needs. In both cases, the situation is presented as a puzzle to the young who must attempt to resolve the conflicts that come about as a result of this realization. For Eddie in "A Long Day in November," the ability to solve the enigma created by Amy's decision to leave him is compounded by his already established communal world view. However, his indirect discovery that the community is no longer capable of defining his individual responsibility to his family is potentially important both for him and for Sonny. Furthermore, the story implies that the community can continue to provide the individual with emotional support in his efforts to fulfill his individual needs. On the other hand, James in "The Sky Is Gray" will never know the values of communal bonds if Octavia has her way. Although the point is never explicitly stated, it is apparent that Octavia finds the values of her community inadequate to make James the kind of man that she feels he must become. Her personal situation can be seen as a metaphor for the plight of blacks. Dependency on the philanthropy and good will of others leads to vulnerability when that support is no longer forthcoming. Her alternative, however, creates an atmosphere which, for James, is potentially equal in the dangers it poses. The fact that neither story offers a resolution to the underlying conflict apparent in the situations is indicative of the contemporary nature of the issue which Gaines raises.

Source: John W. Roberts,. "The Individual and the Community in Two Short Stories by Ernest J. Gaines," in *Black American Literature Forum,* Vol. 18, No. 3, Fall, 1984, pp. 110-13.

Topics for Further Study

Why did James's mother think it was important for him to kill the songbirds? Look up the phrase "rite of passage." Does James's situation fit the definition?

What is the allegorical meaning of the student turning the other cheek when the preacher hits him? Why does he later say that grass is black?

Investigate the relationship between the Civil Rights movement in America and the anti-Apartheid movement in Africa. Are the two related? How?

What Do I Read Next?

W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* is one of the masterworks of 20th century literature, a collection of essays as powerful today as it was nearly a century ago, in 1903, when it was first published. Du Bois begins with the simple observation that what he calls the "color line" is the single greatest problem facing this country. His essays move from history through sociology to spirituality in search of the authentic black soul.

Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* recounts the twenty-seven years he spent in jail as a result of his anti-apartheid work leading *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation), the military wing of the African National Congress, and South Africa's peaceful transition to majority rule in 1994.

Ivan Turgenev's "The District Doctor." Gaines himself cites Ivan Turgenev as one of his more important literary sources, saying that he learned form from Turgenev. "I was very much impressed, not only with form, but with how [the Russians] used their peasantry, how they used their serfs."

William Faulkner's *Light in August* is well-known for its descriptions of the South. Gaines credits reading Faulkner with teaching him about dialogue, "especially when we're dealing with our southern dialects." Most of Faulkner's works require a serious commitment from their reader, but all are worth the effort.

Ernest Gaines's *Bloodline,* the collection from which "The Sky is Gray" is drawn, is a collection of loosely-interrelated stories well worth reading in its entirety.

Further Study

Bryant, Jerry H. "Politics and the Black Novel," in *The Nation,* Vol. 212, No. 14, April 5, 1971, pp. 436-38.

Reviews *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* describing it as an "epic poem." The critic writes: "Literally, it is an account of Jane's life. Figuratively, it is a metaphor of the collective black experience."

Burke, William. "*Bloodline:* A Black Man's South," in *CLA Journal,* Vol. XIX, No. 4, June, 1976, pp. 545-58.

Summarizes *Bloodline,* noting of the work: "The five stories in [this] collection demonstrate their excellence in two ways; they are human stories—moving, humorous, ironic; and they are symbolic—which tradition tells us is a quality of great literature."

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David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

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The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535