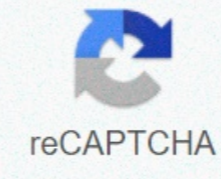




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A gathering of old men

An article & essay by Marcia Gaudet Ernest J. Gaines grew up in a park in South Louisiana, where he was part of a bilingual black rural culture. In an interview, Gaines said: I'm from a long-time storyteller. I come from a garden where people tell stories by the fireplace at night, people tell stories on banks, ditches. People sit down to tell stories. I think in my immediate family there are storytellers or liars, or whatever you want to call them. They would talk and talk, and I listened to them (Lendy 1974:3) as a child, he wrote letters to old people because they couldn't read or write, and he said this made him feel a taste of their oral language first. When he became a writer, trying to capture the taste of folk speech, what Gaines called the voice of my talk man, became a major influence on his style. The use of oral narrative conventions and the influence of folk speech as the basis for his narrative style in his successful fiction works, such as the autobiography of Ms. Jane Pittman, and especially in his latest novel, The Congregation of The Old Man. (1983; the subsequent quotes from this task are referred to the page number in the text of this article.) Louisiana folk lore is an important part of Gaines's novels (see Gaudet's 1984 for debate at this point), Roger Abraham has pointed out that powerful writers are attracted to the use of folk tales, not to make quaint settings, or to present traditional folk objects, but as metaphorical resources, where he draws echoes and nuances that can attract exciting attention and by amplifying the creative contribution energy of his audience. Therefore, the writer gives a distinction in perspective and relates to the reader in his fictional world. Abraham said one carries the impact of literary work because there is something within such work which has excited readers to invest some of their own energy in reading of work. If so, writers have done more than just present a traditional performance list. He has placed that list in an environment where he can make it tougher with vitality. Abraham's article points out that understanding of folk tales of culture and how and why attracting locals (such as the audience) allows writers to use and adjust these same things to work as a mode of reaching audiences in literary works. At the congregation of the old man, Ernest Gaines used fifteen different narrators. However, this experimental narrative technique works to create narrative similarities, the community that contributes to the rich sense of the place. The sense of past, humor, understanding and compassion in this novel, as if reunited, each narrator tells each part of the story, picking up where the other is left in the traditional form of folk storytelling in South Louisiana. Gaines's narrative style and narrative techniques allow characters to effectively expose themselves and their relationships with others while effectively drawing readers into their circles. The old man's rally began with a children's narrator reportedly involved in a shooting in a Louisiana park, and white farmer Cajun Beau Boutan died. He was killed in the field of former Black Mathu workers because of the traditional conflict between Cajuns and blacks in South Louisiana, tensions in the situation and fears of blacks being felt immediately. Race relations are always complicated, but in Southern Louisiana, this complexity is compounded by the presence of Cajun - a traditionally white, poor, uneducated and minority with a history of violence against blacks. They compete for earth and livelihood, but Cajuns in the past have a competitive advantage in separate societies. Within this framework, Gaines uses fifteen narrators, such as black, old and young, to deal with the changing relationship between Cajuns and black in Louisiana in the late 1970s, when each narrator picks up the story, we see the tension between the past and the present, the conflict between whites and blacks, and most importantly the conflict and tension between each older black man and his younger past as he tries to deal with why he has waited so long to settle his account. This technique is very effective, since it sets the frame for gradually unfolding the depth of the character and the courage of the men. Mapes, a white sheriff who traditionally dealt with blacks using intimidation and force, found himself in a frustrating situation having to deal with a group of older black men, each holding a shotgun, and each claiming he shot Beau Boutan. There seems to be only one real suspect, Mathu, an old black man that Candy is determined to protect, whether he wants or needs her protection. Every old man has a motive to kill Bo, but only Mathu is seen as human enough to do it. He's the only one who's ever stood up to a white man before. While each man tells us why he shot Beau, both the reader and the sheriff regard him as a true suspect. But we get a memorable picture of that person in terms of ghosts from his past. The Men gather to deal with the past, they don't lay to rest - that they didn't come before, and then find the courage together to deal with it. Gaines's narrative techniques allow characters to reveal themselves and their relationships with others. We hear the story through the narrative of a black man, an old black woman (Jenny). We see not only the contradictions of blacks, but also the contradictions of their Cajun rivals through the voices of Sully and Tee Jack, the old world of Fix Boutan, the leader of Cajunmob, known to black people, violence against blacks, and they must come to an end, and they must come to terms with the new world that symbolizes the youngest son of Fix, Gil, an LSU footballer who has allies on gridiron, black and peppered by LSU as a friend of Fixe. (142), it's an interesting point that although the novel has fifteen narrators, Gaines doesn't give a narrative voice to the three main characters, Mathu, Candy and Mapes. As Gaines pointed out, Mathu must have lied, Matu knew what was going on, and if you start hearing Matu's voice and he didn't tell you what was going on, We deceive you, and I don't want to fool you (Gaines, October 1987), with the main characters, all three techniques coming from indirectly, rather than through their own voices, tend to increase the impact of engagement and participation in the whole thing. It is also true that with the main character Cajun (Boutans), we see them through the narrative voice of Sully, a friend of Gil Boutan and Tee Jack, the bar owner Cajun is not directly involved in the conflict. However, the most important thing is to exclude the main character as a narrator, reinforcing the folk narrative techniques associated with events shared by each teller, bringing his focus or perspective. Proffitt achieves both the immediacy and intimacy of the folk narrative and the complexity of indirect methods. It is not necessary for the reader to recognize or identify each narrator. It is important to impress, fear, feelings and experiences together. Using the narrator, many people also make it possible to have the kind of wonderful, humorous insight he achieved in his short stories. A long day in November, and the sky is gray, we see the old man they see together. 'Uncle Billy tried to aim the gun and shook it so much that it looked like a divinm stick' and Johnny Paul tried to explain it to Mapes. He had to be there for seventy-seven years so he couldn't see right now what they were. Readers can laugh at them because they are drawn into their circle. The reader becomes an insider. Most novels take place over a period of one day, and when the events of the day come to an unexpected climax, we are moved with the characters for a better understanding of the contradictions and changes that arise. The congregation of the old man is a warm, delicate and honest novel that combines humor and compassion in dealing with conflict, and only skilled craftsmen know that these people can manage fifteen narrative voices to make this technique work. With numerous studies that analyze the use of oral traditions in literature and studies on differences in patterns in oral storytelling and writing, Scholes and Kellogg in the nature of storytelling suggest that many non-traditional original narrators present themselves to us from printed duties as if they were oral performances before the audience (1966:54). In another interview, Gaines said he liked listening to the way people spoke, and I like to hear their stories. Then, when I went into some little room, a place I tried to write down (Fitz Gerald and Marchant 1969:333), when he became a writer, he realized the importance of listening to dialect carefully and finding ways to deal with the Louisiana language in writing fiction. He said, You must make it readable. Because if you're stuck with the way people say where I'm from, I can't read if I write like that (Laney 1974:12) has been learning how folk and patterns speak directly from oral tradition culture. He learned conventions, literature, patterns and how to use things from oral traditions from the models he studied. He also recognizes the importance of using the first narrator to make the reader part of the narrative, just as the listener's circle becomes part of the show of folk storytellers. Gaines often said that Twain and Faulkner were most influential in his style in adapting oral narrative traditions to literary media. In talking about creating his own literary work according to oral traditions, Gaines has said: You're transferring from what the oral men sit there telling the story. You have to take what he tells you and use those things. The letters here to put this thing down correctly. You try to put it down very accurately, but then you know you can't do it because you can't take all the gestures; you can't use all his voices, using his inappropriate grammar, what he's doing. That doesn't convey to the reader because the reader can't understand what you're talking about. I can take what he told me and say, okay, I'm going halfway with what he told me and I'll get what I've learned from reading all these years. Then I use the appropriate syntax. I'll use the right spelling. I'll take all those little things. I'll take from what he gave me and I'll use my background. I'll take something from here that I have, and then I'll incorporate these things, and then I'll put it out there and pray that someone will understand (Gaines 1986). Gaines's style and his ability to capture the French taste of the talk of bilingual Creole-Cajun culture, let his fiction come true that it can't be done otherwise. At the same time, the use of dialects and his judgmental style of expression enabled him to maintain a simple and lush style and qualities described as the speaking dignity of his narrative style (Bryant 1974:852), another feature of Gaines's writing style, using judicial repetition and selection. These things involve choosing a word. Gaines uses repetition effectively in his writing to simulate oral narratives, because repetition is an important part of folk speech in South Louisiana. For example, Mathu is black black, with a white beard (6) or she doesn't say anything. Just looking old and tired, eating her t-shirt in front of her looks old and tired, looking (7) to speak about the influence of music in his writing. Gaines has said: I think the blue-and-black singer gave a better explanation than even black writers did at the time. Another particular thing in jazz is that repetition, repetition and repetition to get to the point, which I tried to make in negotiations (Gains, January 1987), seems like what Gaines is doing, not only capturing the message of oral folk narrative, but also capturing the nuances of emotions and setting what's called (Dundes 1964), the texture and context of the oral narrative. Gaines also uses the story within the story, which is an important device in folk lectures (see Babcock 1977), as he has an old man telling stories from their past. Gaines understands the complexity of folk storytelling style and he can capture that style in literary form. And his knowledge of folk culture gives him a framework for his narrative style and for each human presentation and their relationship. Gaines uses narrative techniques from oral traditions, seemingly natural, as the narrative seems to have evolved from culture and people. One important difference between Gaines and other black writers is that Gaines returns to the South. He's not a literary exile. He can express both the historical racial conflict between Cajuns and black and change, especially in old black men and young Cajuns. From his narrative voice, it is clear that he did not lose contact with people. His storytelling techniques are genuine and his narrative voice is genuine. In Gaines, righteousness is there. But it's not the intense anger of other black writers, with both anger and an understanding of Gaines, a gentle anger that has seen guilt in the past, but is willing to recognize the current positive changes. Gaines also said, I'm trying to honestly tell things in a real way. I try to tell a good story, but I want to show people like it is true (Gaines 1984) in an old man's congregation, Gaines tells a great story, and through his folk narrative style, he demonstrates with honesty and compassion the complexity of relations in Southern Louisiana culture. Folk tales and literature are displayed in the Journal of folk institutions 9:75-94 Babcock, Barbara A. 1977. In the folk narrative. 61-79 Ed Richard Bauman Rowley, MA: Ernest J. Gaines: Change, Growth and History Southern Review 10:851-864 Dandes Alan 1964. Interview: Ernest J. Gaines Review New Orleans 1:331-35. New York's Knopf. Private interview gaudet Marcia 1984. New York: Oxford University publisher Stahl Sandra K. Style in oral storytelling and writing This article was originally published in the 1990 edition of The Louisiana Folklore Miscellaneous and printed here with the permission of Marcia Gaudet, a folkman who teaches in the Department of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Lafayette.

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