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## **A Comparative Study of Earnest Hemingway and Ernest Gaines: Generational Conflicts and Literary Lineage**

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Focusing on the depiction of the father-son relationship and the generational conflicts in their works, as well as the metaphorical literary father-son relationship between the two authors, this dissertation offers an intertextual reading of the works of Ernest Hemingway and Ernest J. Gaines.

Part One examines Hemingway's Nick Adams stories that feature the young hero's growing disillusionment with and eventual rejection of his home and family. Parodying conventional stereotypes about Native American ways of life, Hemingway deconstructs prevailing notions of race by aligning Nick's father with the wilderness and the Indians. Gaines's earliest short stories focus on a reunion of the historically-divided African American family. Deconstructing traditional views of gender, Gaines emphasizes the concept of the African American extended and surrogate family as ever-changing. Part Two shifts the focus from the son to the fathers. Hemingway's seminal story "Fathers and Sons" presents a cyclical view of time, according to which the son runs the risk of repeating the father's mistakes. The father's "sins," especially his suicide, are not resolved until Robert Jordan sacrifices himself for his friends at the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and thus becomes a "father" to others. The discussion of Gaines's two major novels on the perspective of fathers, *In My Father's House* and *A Gathering of Old Men*, demonstrates how the generational gap can be bridged. Part Three analyzes the metaphorical father-son relationship between Hemingway and Gaines. Using Harold Bloom's anxiety-of-influence theory as a model, and Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* as the original text both Hemingway and Gaines studied and "misread," this section compares and contrasts the generational conflicts in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Gaines's *Catherine Carmier* and *A Lesson Before Dying*.

The conclusion looks at Hemingway's and Gaines's works as instances of lifewriting and places the two writers in two different traditions, with Hemingway representing a Western form of autobiography that emphasizes the individual and with Gaines representing an African form of autobiography that stresses the interdependence of individual and group experience.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

This study brings together two writers who are usually not thought of in the same context. Hemingway is typically discussed under the mantle of modernism and ranks as one of the great American short story writers and novelists, whereas Ernest Gaines is usually discussed

under the category of African American and/or Southern literature. It is my purpose to demonstrate how the two writers can be read and taught together, as they are linked by many common themes and stylistic elements. However, their differences are even more instructive in that they allow the reader to compare and contrast the two traditions they represent.

The father-son theme both exemplifies the connection and difference between the two authors. Many of Hemingway's protagonists reject the father and the family at a starting point to form their own identity. Grounding one's identity often means leaving home behind and searching elsewhere. Severance from all ties and the ensuing independence, however, lead to a precarious freedom that frequently amounts to living in a void and brings with it the danger of sons repeating their fathers' mistakes. The suicide motif illustrates both the generational rift and the dilemma of life as a cycle that repeats itself. Both Nick Adams and Robert Jordan struggle with their fathers' suicides and with the attendant ruptures of the generational links. Whereas Nick Adams is unable to understand his father's suicide and bring together the past and the present, Robert Jordan subordinates his private concerns for the sake of the community's good and is thereby able to end his struggle with the past.

In Gaines's works, by contrast, the characters' identity needs to be grounded in the family and in the community, which often functions as a surrogate family. Hemingway's notion of "independence" is not a positive goal to aspire to, as the individual in Gaines's world is inextricably intertwined with the community and any effort to break out of the communal bond is bound to effect the community and the individual in a negative way. The generational link must therefore always be preserved.

The suicide motif, then, is handled differently by Gaines. When Philip Martin in *In My Father's House* learns about his son's suicide, he must apply the lessons he learns regarding his own past to the future. He has another son, whose fate will depend on his ability to change his selfish attitude and irresponsible behaviour. What's more, he has a community of friends who support him. The death of Robert X, then, is not a matter of shame but a lesson for the future. Similarly, the suicide of Tee Bob Samson in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is not only an incrimination of his father's and forefathers' racist codes but also serves as one of the catalysts for Miss Jane's activism when she defies segregationist laws by walking to the water fountain at the end of the novel.

The other deaths in Gaines's fiction have a similar function as Robert Jordan's self-sacrificing act. Charlie's sacrifice in *A Gathering of Old Men* changes the entire community, white and black, as does Jefferson's heroic "standing" for the execution in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Jefferson's diary assumes a central place in Gaines's works, as it sums up his belief in the interdependence of the individual and the community and speaks the words of love and support that will serve as a powerful script for the community's future. Thus, unlike Hemingway's works, which emphasize an allegiance to the self, Gaines's stories and novels illustrate the self's responsibility to others.

Another way to illustrate the differences between Hemingway and Gaines may be to regard their works as instances of life-writing. If it is indeed the case that all writers create out of their experiences, then it is even more valid to claim such for Hemingway and Gaines.

As my remarks on Hemingway's and Gaines's backgrounds have indicated, both writers' works have been shaped by the authors' childhood experiences, especially with regard to the father-son theme. Reading any Hemingway or Gaines book certainly makes one aware that the two writers have somehow transformed their own experiences and those of other people they knew into their fiction.

At first reading, however, neither Hemingway nor Gaines would be classified as strictly autobiographical writers in the conventional sense, as neither writer has written an autobiography of himself. Hemingway's earliest short stories, which feature Nick in the author's Michigan summer home; the stories and novels reflecting his own involvement in and fascination with wars; and his non-fiction writings about hunting safaris and fishing trips, as well as about the bullfights he has seen—all are imbued with an autobiographical aura. The closest Hemingway comes to autobiography is in his Nick Adams stories; Nick can certainly be regarded as Hemingway's alter ego. In addition, *A Moveable Feast* could be called an autobiographical account of his time in Paris even though it is highly fictional, as are the depictions of his safaris in Africa in *Green Hills of Africa* and *True at First Light*.

The same influence of the childhood home on the author can be seen in the works of Ernest Gaines, who continues to be driven by "this Louisiana thing." In Gaines's case, "The Sky Is Gray" may be his most autobiographical piece of work, as it is loosely based on his own harsh experiences as a boy—Gaines's middle name, like the protagonist's, is James—and on his own mother's strength. However, I would like to argue that Gaines is less interested in foregrounding himself in his work than in writing a composite "folk autobiography," which is how he characterized *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (Rowell 47).

If one considers the pervasive father-son relationship and other recurring themes in both Hemingway's and Gaines's oeuvre, it furthermore seems as if their narratives are never finished within the cover of a single book, but that the writers have to continually go back where they have left off and wrestle with the same issues again, under a different light, with changing scenarios. Both writers thus appear to be compelled to write in order to find answers to personal questions. The impact of the father-son relationship on other themes in Hemingway's and Gaines's stories and novels allow their works to be read as renewed attempts to come to terms with their respective familial concerns and to find answers for them. The two writers' radically different concepts of the self eventually lead to radically different notions of how themes are developed, and they also have important effects on the writers' styles.

James Olney's discussion of two distinct forms of autobiography is useful in order to distinguish between Hemingway's and Gaines's writings. On the one hand, Olney describes a particularly Western tendency "to take the life of the self to be the true self, the real self, the life about which an autobiography should be written" ("Value" 53). This form of

autobiography Olney calls “autoautography.” Hemingway seems to be an especially strong representative of this form of life-writing. Even though not strictly autobiographical, his works, even *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in spite of Robert Jordan’s transformation, remain focused on the individual. Hemingway can therefore be said to represent the Western tradition that takes the self to be at the center of life. Stressing the singularity of each character’s life, Hemingway’s works reflect renewed attempts to portray his own struggle, to give expression to his own inner confusion. Certainly, Olney’s definition of the autobiographical act applies to Hemingway: “The autobiographical act . . . [is] a perpetually renewed attempt to find language adequate to rendering the self and its experience, an attempt that includes within itself all earlier attempts” (Memory 9). Read as such, Hemingway’s miscellaneous works, his short stories, novels, autobiographical writings, and travel accounts provide us with intriguing insights into the man behind the pen, as they “bring forth ever different memorial configurations and an ever newly shaped self” (Memory 20). If we read Hemingway’s works as instances of life-writing, we thus arrive at a composite picture of one man, starting with the fear of night and mortality as a boy in “Three Shots,” continuing with his attempts as a man to create an identity in various countries, while always attempting to come to terms with the father, and ending with the old fisherman’s proven heroism even as he loses the prize (marlin). Always the focus is on one individual’s struggle—the man himself behind the pen.

In this context, Michel de Montaigne, who writes of the “consubstantial” process of self creation and book creation, comes to mind: “I have no more made my book than my book has made me—a book consubstantial with its author, concerned with my own self, an integral part of my life” (504).<sup>1</sup> We can therefore ask whether Hemingway’s writing about his own experiences and the concomitant public myths he created also “made” him in the same way. Did not Hemingway in writing about his various exploits—as a wounded war hero, as a skilled hunter, as an expert fisherman—“fashion and compose” himself so often that “the model itself has to some extent grown firm and taken shape,” as it has in Montaigne’s case (504)? Was he not afterwards trying to live up to the myths that he created with the thinly-disguised self-portrayals in his works? Are not the agonizing and sorrowful thoughts of Nick Adams in “Fathers and Sons” the writer’s own with regard to his alienation from his father and his sons? These questions seem to be bound up with the pervasive emphasis on the self and the cyclical view of life that we see manifested in Hemingway’s work and life. Hemingway’s writings are an “involved and reflexive exercise,” as the writer constantly looks inward, toward his own self (Olney, “Value” 53). Whereas Hemingway’s writings are firmly situated in the Western tradition of autoautography, Ernest Gaines’s works can be seen as representing a more African notion of autobiography. Referring to the Sonjo people in Tanzania, John Mbiti explains that “the individual is united with the rest of his community, both the living and the dead, and humanly speaking nothing can separate him from this corporate society” (117). Reminiscent of Jefferson’s “lowly as I am, I am still part of the whole” in *A Lesson Before Dying* (LBD 194), the Sonjo exclaim, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti 117).



This bond between the individual and the community is what Gaines strives to achieve with all of his characters. Jackson Bradley in *Catherine Carmier* is too much concerned with himself, and Phillip Martin in *In My Father's House* has only made a first step to reach out to the community. By contrast, the old men and women in *A Gathering of Old Men* as well as Grant and Jefferson at the end of *A Lesson Before Dying* have realized that “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” Most obviously, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines’s “folk autobiography” celebrates this emphasis on “we” as opposed to “I.” We must remember that it is the neighbors and friends who help Miss Jane remember her life, which is not only her life, but the life of a whole people who have survived from the Civil War to the civil rights movement. Memory, then, is primarily seen as a collective faculty rather than a mere individual one. Following Olney’s distinction, I would therefore claim that Gaines’s writings can be seen as representing an African notion of autobiography, which de-emphasizes the individual. Gaines is writing in the tradition of “autophylography,” a term which is based on the Greek word *phyle*, which suggests “a union among the citizens of a state, a class or tribe formed according to blood” and “a union according to local habitation, a tribe” (“Value” 57-58). Is not Jefferson’s forming a “union” with his community the first step to his transformation? Does not Grant’s simultaneous change indicate the interdependence of individuals? And does not the change of the Deputy Paul Bonin anticipate a wider “union among the citizens of the state”? Are not the old men and women in *A Gathering of Old Men* the harbingers of a new order, a new “union,” whose first signs can be seen in the transformations of Charlie, Mathu, Candy, and Sheriff Mapes? And is not Gaines’s voice heard in not one but in all of these characters?

Gaines’s focus on the community, on writing not about himself but about the “phyle,” begins with *Bloodline*. After he had finished writing *Catherine Carmier*, Gaines felt that he “had lost touch with the world I wanted to write about” (“Bloodline in Ink” 526).<sup>2</sup> Like Jackson, he returned home, spent six months in Baton Rouge, and reconnected to the past that he had lost. With the short story collection *Bloodline*, Gaines begins his lifelong interest in writing an “autophylography.” As he explains, “Bloodline is the beginning of my going back into the past. . . . After the *Bloodline* stories, I realized that I needed to go farther and farther back in time” (“Bloodline in Ink” 527-28). From the focus on males, Gaines would move to Miss Jane Pittman and to the gathering of old men and women in front of Mathu’s house. Jefferson’s understanding that he is “part of the whole” when the entire community pays him a visit in jail marks the temporary end of Gaines’s exploration of the “phyle,” which, without any doubt, is now being continued in *The Man Who Whipped Children*.<sup>3</sup>

The distinction between Hemingway and Gaines in terms of looking at their writings as a form of “autoautography” and “autophylography” respectively seems to summarize best what this study has tried to make clear. Whereas Ernest Gaines’s early works show remarkable similarities to Hemingway in his perception of such concepts as “identity” and the “self,” Gaines soon departed from the Western emphasis on the individual to embrace a concept of identity that includes others, notably the family and larger community. Gaines thus stresses interdependence and portrays the complex and difficult relationship between the individual and the community. Ironically, in order to achieve this, he had to follow the path of many

Hemingway characters and reject his (literary) father, Hemingway, and immerse himself in the African American folk culture of his home state.

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