

SYMBOLS AND THE SUBVERSION OF HEGEMONY IN ERNEST GAINES'S *A GATHERING OF OLD MEN*¹

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ABSTRACT

The use of symbols in *A Gathering of Old Men* satirizes the society described in the novel. This satirical description takes into account aspects like tractor, jail, and electric chair which are images epitomizing and recalling the long history of Blacks and the struggle they have undertaken to fit into the fabric of the society they live in. The reference to other notions like plantation, graveyard and swamp are symbols that typify and remind the suffering endured by Blacks for their full integration in the society presented in their living environment. These symbols recount and bring out the turbulent relations between Blacks and Whites.

Key words: symbolism, Tractor, Jail, Electric chair, Plantation, graveyard, swamp.

¹Ernest Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men*, New York: Vintage, 1983.

Thenceforth, any citation appearing in this work will be from this edition and will be indicated with the initials AGOM, standing for A Gathering of Old Men, and followed by the page number of the quoted passage.

RESUME

L'utilisation de symboles dans *A Gathering of Old Men* fait la satire de la société décrite dans le roman. Cette description satirique prend en compte des aspects tels que le tracteur, la prison et la chaise électrique qui sont des images résumant et rappelant la longue histoire des Noirs et la lutte qu'ils ont entreprise pour s'intégrer dans le tissu de la société dans laquelle ils vivent. La référence à d'autres notions telles que la plantation, cimetière et marais sont des symboles qui caractérisent et rappellent les souffrances endurées par les Noirs pour leur pleine intégration dans leur milieu de vie. Ces symboles relatent et font ressortir les relations turbulentes entre Noirs et Blancs.

Mots clés: symbolisme, tracteur, prison, chaise électrique, plantation, cimetière, marais

INTRODUCTION

African-American literature deals with problems relating to the American society in general, but it is particularly concerned with the experiences of black people as a community. Thus, the situation of Blacks constitutes an inexhaustible source of inspiration for African-American writers who denounce with details the difficulties they meet. Ernest Gaines is one of these African-American writers whose imaginations are oriented towards racial problems. In his literary work, he mostly employs symbols to highlight events, facts or institutions which refer to the existence of Blacks living in a hostile environment.

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, evocative symbols are picked out to recount the life of Blacks. In his analysis of symbolism in literature, Ginny Wiehardt indicates that it is used to produce an impact, which it accomplishes by attaching additional meaning to an action, object, or name. Symbolism takes something that is usually concrete and associates or affixes it to something else in order to give it a new and more significant meaning (G. Wiehardt, 2019).

In other words, symbolism allows a writer to convey something to their audience in a poetic way instead of saying it outright. This indirect approach allows an author to create nuance and complexity. The caveat for authors is that the entire context of the story needs to support the symbol's meaning. It is in this context that Moreas states: "In this art, scenes from nature, human activities, and all other real world phenomena will not be described for their own sake; here, they are perceptible surfaces created to represent their esoteric affinities with the primordial Ideals" (J. Moreas, 1886 pp. 1-2).

Our purpose in this paper is to show the interconnection between the symbols presented in the novel and the life of black people. We are more concerned with demonstrating the way these symbols shape and influence their daily life?

To analyze symbolism in *A Gathering of Old Men*, we will use the theory of New Criticism as theoretical grounding of the study. John Crowe defines this theory as "a formalist movement in literary theory that emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object" (J.C. Ransom, 1941).

We apply the theory of New Criticism to *A Gathering of Old Men* to stress the fact that the symbols in the novel and their meanings are intimately connected and cannot be analyzed separately since they clarify completely the daily real-life of Blacks. In our analysis, we will first deal with symbols indicating terror and suffering that constitute the daily lot of Blacks in the environment presented in the novel. In fact, objects like tractor, jail and electric chair are metaphors that describe the difficult living conditions of Blacks and highlight the fact that they live in a society that is hostile to their survival. Secondly, we will throw light on allegorical elements like graveyard, swamp and plantations

which are reminiscent of the past difficult life of Blacks. These elements prevent them from having happy memories of the life they experienced before.

1- THE METAPHOR OF TERROR

A Gathering of Old Men is a novel that deals with events relating to the life of Blacks that are indirectly described. It uses metaphorical manner endowing with particular images with symbolic meaning relating to their living conditions. One of these images is the tractor which constitutes a symbol of mechanized agricultural practices permitting Whites to take control of the jobs once held by Blacks. It is an object that represents a destructive force that reduces the possibility of economic power for Blacks.

1.1 The Tractor, a Metaphor of Land Despoliation

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the metaphorical depiction of the tractor appears as a powerful tool of communication that helps to understand the implication of the tractor. The tractor implies agricultural mechanization that occurs with the development of farms owned by Whites. This mechanization causes negative effects on Blacks since it changes their traditional means of survival. It annihilates the opportunity for labor. Blacks, who previously owned and farmed the land, are now unemployed. The tractor represents a symbol that increases the difficult living conditions of Blacks as it pushes them off the land. The destructive effect of the tractor depriving Blacks of their land is described by Jonny Paul, one of Gaines' black characters as follows: "That tractor was go'n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that we ever was. Like now they are trying to get rid of all proof that Black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules" (AGOM, 92).

The modernization of agriculture undertaken by Whites has as goal not only to snatch the land from Blacks, but also to find no trace of their real life in that place. To express their discontent, they shot the tractor's driver, Beau Boutan to death. Beau's murder has also two important symbolic significances.

The first significance of Beau's murder is that it is seen not only as a challenge to the racist social order that maintained Blacks in a permanent state of dependence, but also as a bad omen that the old social order established is changing in favor of Blacks. Events happening in the society presented in the novel are escaping from Whites' control.

The second significance of Beau's murder is that it represents a rebellion against the injustice that the Black community is victim. Beau Boutan undergoes the punishment for all the crimes he and his father Fix Boutan have committed against Blacks. Charlie, the Black character who actually pulls the trigger to kill Beau Boutan explains his act in these terms: "No matter if I did twice the work any other man could do, he 'bused me anyhow. I can work longer than any man I ever met. Still he 'bused me. Cussed me for no cause at all" (AGOM,52).

Charlie's resentment shows that there is a close link between his idea and the way he expresses it. He is reluctant to what he is told to do and his reluctance is perceived through his anger. His attitude highlights the theory of New Criticism as indicated by Arthur Biddle who states that "New Criticism examines the relationships between a text's ideas and its form, between what a text says and the way it says it" (A. Biddle, 1989). Charlie expresses his exasperation of not being treated like a human being, but like a machine, that works endlessly. For Charlie, Beau's murder represents evidence that he deserves the same sign of respect as anybody, whatever the color of their skin. Charlie likens Beau to abuse. Beau's death means putting an end to a long tradition of abuse. The Whites' use of the tractor is a repeating symbol in the novel. The agricultural mechanization has

displaced the vibrant black community that once worked the land. For Charlie, the murderer, Beau is killed in order to compensate for what they and their ancestors have suffered.

The dreadful image of the tractor is seen near Beau's dead body. When the group of black men and the Sheriff arrive at the place, they find that the engine of the tractor is still running. The motor of the tractor which continues to run after Beau's death implies that the process of mechanization undertaken by Whites, consisting in despoiling the land from Blacks is on. The death of Beau does not put an end to the system of stripping black people of their land. Accordingly, White people will continue to exert a total domination on Blacks. This is why when the gunfire started, white people hid behind the tractor, which was for them an appropriate symbolic location. It represents modernity and a technical know-how in farming contrary to Blacks who are specialized in manual activities. Hidden behind the tractor, it does not only protect them physically, but it also protects their future, meaning that it is a sure means to practice an extensive culture. The tractor represents also a hope for them because it permits them to have more land to plow. This is why during the battle, Black people did not shoot only at White people, but also at the tractor, their symbolic enemy. Conway Roderick indicates that the attitude of Blacks shooting at the tractor meets the message Stephane Mallarmé sends to his friend Cazalis in a letter telling him "to depict not the thing, but the effect it produces" (C.M. Roderick, 2007).

Actually, black people are not challenging the tractor, but its devastating effects. The tractor is the root of all evil they face since it is the main cause of their decline and ruin.

The tractor is not the only element which constitutes symbolically an obstacle to the social welfare of Blacks. Jail appears also as an image which reproduces the system of Panopticism as conceptualized by the French philosopher and social critic Michel Foucault.

1.2 The Metaphor of Jail

In *A Gathering of Old Men* jail appears as a tool exhibited by white people to show the direct link between the terrible ordeals it represents and the trauma it creates in the mind of Black people. The metaphor employed in the novel presents Jail as a symbol of dissuasion and discouragement. It is always brandished against Blacks to compel them to give up any kind of struggle whose goal is to have the same rights as Whites.

In the course of the Sheriff's investigation to discover the murderer of Beau Boutan, he questions in turn the old men gathered at Mathu's house. Speaking to one of them, he said: "Either I stand here and let you talk about things you don't see, and the things the others don't see, or I take you in?" (AGOM, 189). When he says "I take you in", he means to imprison him. Prison appears as coercion means to force him to tell what he knows about the crime. Prison becomes then a tool of threat. The Sheriff believes that when Black people think that prison means privation of freedom, they will submit themselves to his authority. For him, since prison life rhymes with torture and suffering, Blacks will be afraid and will be at his disposal. Through the Sheriff's sentiments, we clearly perceive the image that gets out of the notion of prison. Prison is displayed by Whites to weaken Blacks. For White people, at the idea of knowing that any protest, rebellion or upheaval can end in prison, Blacks will give up the fight whose goal is to establish a social order where their rights will be guaranteed. Mentioning the notion of prison and the trauma that it entails, Whites drive Blacks to passivity. They make them bear in mind that their security and freedom are conditioned by their inactivity facing with atrocities and injustice they frequently undergo. For White people, having always black people under their command is the surest means to dominate them. Activism whose goal is to bring about political

and social changes in favor of Blacks is considered as a danger and even as a crime. Thus, Black activists who fight for the better of their communities and for the dignity of Blacks are either sent to prison or killed. It is in this context that Jefferson has been arrested and sent to jail in *A Lesson Before Dying* (E. Gaines, 1993). He was in prison not because a suspicion of murder hung over him, but simply because he refused to behave like a hog in accordance with the conception of Whites. On the contrary, he challenged and rejected that dehumanizing conception in order to assert his mankind.

Throughout *A Gathering of Old Men*, the Sheriff presents the prison as an obstacle to the progress and blossoming of Blacks. Speaking to Beulah, one of the old men at Mathu's, he said: "And you'll do anything to make me take you to jail, is that it?" (AGOM, 108).

From the quotation above, we notice that the lesser doings of Blacks that go against those of Whites are enough to threaten them or to send them to jail. For the Sheriff, the security and quietness of Blacks are due to their submissiveness to Whites. Through his character, Beulah, Gaines refers to slaves who internalize this behavior of systematic acquiescence to the point of becoming imperceptibly "sambo" models. Philippe Paraire explains this notion of "sambo" models to show how slaves apply the learned powerlessness. According to him, "the basic psychology of the slave is structured by the 'yessir', which can assure a minimum of quietness" (P. Paraire, 1993, p. 240).

Paraire's conception of the southern slave meets Gaines's to emphasize the animality of Blacks, the perfect image of the Southern stereotype of the dumb and happy, naïve and respectful black slave.

A Gathering of Old Men presents the prison as a means to dissuade Blacks from fighting for their rights and for their dignity. Gaines's portrayal of the notion of prison meets Foucault's Panopticism. The concept of Panopticism coined by Foucault is described as a system of internal surveillance (M. Foucault, 1977). So the Sheriff in the black neighborhood plays the role of the model for that surveillance operated against black in the novel. Jail is a tool that helps Whites to control and dominate Black people. Through the prison, White people seem to have worked out a strategy in which the life and character of Blacks are described as submissive people. Throughout the novel, the prison appears as the symbol of this strategy.

In addition to the prison that symbolizes captivity, submissiveness and privation of freedom, the electric chair is also portrayed in the novel as a metaphor symbolizing horror.

1.3 The Electric Chair, a Metaphor of Horror

A Gathering of Old Men highlights the electric chair to create a clear comparison between the electric chair and the horror it expresses. The metaphor in the novel gives an awful description of the electric chair making black people to imagine its dreadful effects on their lives. The electric chair is conceived by Whites as a means to subjugate and reduce Blacks to silence. The electric chair clearly indicates the hostile environment in which Blacks live. In the novel, a Black boy of about sixteen years old has been electrocuted on a chair on the basis of a slander. He is wrongly accused of having raped a white girl. Facing with that brutal death, the boy's father expresses his indignation when he says: "But they put him in that chair 'cause she said he raped her. Even if he did it, he was still no more than sixteen years old, and they knowed he was half out his mind" (AGOM, 101). The indignation of the boy's father stands in the fact that his son is still minor and innocent, so he should benefit from extenuating circumstances. But they killed him despite his adolescence. The fact of killing a teenager on an electric chair is a warning that Whites send to Blacks. That horrible killing means that Blacks, whatever their age do not escape the supreme penalty: death. This horrible death on the electric chair should be seen as an example for other Blacks. They will undergo the same fate

whenever they will try to challenge Whites' authority or bother them. According to White people, through this killing, Blacks should understand that they are inferior people and should submit themselves to them. This submissiveness is found in the sentiments of the boy's father when he says: "And what did I do about them killing my boy like that? What could a poor old nigger do but go up to the White folks and fall down on his knees?" (AGOM, 102).

The electric chair symbolizes and expresses Whites' racist attitudes. Soon after the boy died on the chair, Monk, a black sexagenarian as an eyewitness, depicts the behavior of White people as follows: "They brought the boy out, strapped him in, and pulled the switch... them white folks walked out of that room like they were leaving a card game. They weren't even talking about it. It wasn't worth talking about" (AGOM, 102).

For these White people, the death of a boy is a secondary phenomenon. Their sentiments show that they play down the boy's death and express their scorn towards Blacks. They have no respect and consideration for Blacks that their death goes unnoticed. The boy's father was completely afflicted by the disdain displayed by Whites who killed his son. His affliction is made worse by what he learned from Whites after his son's death. He reports that: "some went as far to say that my boy shoulda been glad he died in the electric chair 'stead at the end of a rope" (AGOM, 102).

While Blacks people through Gable, the boy's father express their helplessness facing the electric chair presented as a despicable machine, Whites, on the contrary indicate that it is an honor that the boy died in the electric chair. For them, dying in the electric chair is the best thing that can happen to Blacks. The horror expressed by the electric chair is aggravated by its poor state. The dysfunction of the electric chair is an image that reinforces its macabre nature. Black people perceive it as a tool that is strange and horrible because it usually involves death. Because it is the cause of misfortune that Blacks experience, they compare it to evil. It is a killing machine. Through the poor state of the electric chair, the author wants to stress that any object that expresses horror is repulsive. Monk, one of the old Black man attending the execution of the boy at the courthouse describes how White people manage to make the electric chair run: "... while two more was in there hitting and kicking and cussing that thing to make it work... and they send get somebody from Baton rouge to come fix it" (AGOM, 102).

With the use of verbs like "hitting" and "cussing", we notice that White people at the courthouse personify the electric chair into a character that does not act in a desired way. This is why they curse it. The fact of cursing that chair emphasizes the negative image it is ascribed to. This is why Lucy Mair States that "dramatists usually attribute such deeds to treacherous and villain characters" (L. Mair, 1965).

The electric chair is cast as the villain, not only because it symbolizes the horror and the ordeal undergone by Blacks, but it is also presented as a betrayer by not functioning as it is expected to. *A Gathering of Old Men*, depicts the turbulent relations between Blacks and Whites by presenting metaphorical elements like tractor, jail and electric chair as symbols of terror experienced by Blacks. Likewise, the remembrance of some events refers to and symbolizes their past painful life.

2- THE ALLEGORICAL SYMBOLS OF REMEMBRANCE

A Gathering of Old Men is a novel that resorts to allegories to evoke some spaces where events have enameled the life of Black people. In the novel, the allegories used lean on some devices to bring forth spaces that make newer black generations relive and understand the events that their ancestors have experienced on Marshall Plantation. One these devices is historical allegory.

2.1 Historical Allegory

A Gathering of Old Men, is a novel that employs historical allegory as a literary device to convey a message about issues and events that have taken place on Marshall Plantation. It recalls evocative past events that are significant and draw the attention of current black communities living on that plantation. Historical allegory deployed in the novel presents Marshall Plantation as a symbol to effectively make vivid past events in the mind of black people. Marshall Plantation is a space where Blacks and Whites live side by side, but the former in the “quarters”, the area they call “slave quarter”, while the latter live in the Marshall house, where the slave owners inhabited. This geographic division of the plantation indicates that it is still governed as it was during slavery. The division recalls the old social order that maintained Blacks in a total dependence and submissiveness. The language they use while calling each other reinforces the image of the old social order that prevailed. The title that precedes their names while calling each other shows the different social classes they belong to. White people mention “Uncle” or “Aunt” before the name of Blacks, while Blacks say “Mr” or “Miss” before the name of Whites. The lesson to be learnt here is that traditionally, Whites referred to older black men and women as “Uncle” or “Aunt”, whereas Blacks labelled White men and women as “Mr” or “Miss”.

In the novel, Candy, the White woman who sends a Black boy, Snookum to gather all the Blacks in the quarters at Mathu’s refers to Glo, an old woman as “Aunt Glo” (AGOM, 3). Conversely, Janey a Black woman working at Marshall House is astonished when Snookum calls White people saying Lou, Merle, or Candy. For Janey, this way of calling white people is a lack of respect this why she orders him to call them with a sign of respect saying “Mr Lou”, “Miss Merle” or “Miss Candy”. When Snookum asks her the necessity to call them this way, she answers: “you say Mister and Miss round me. That’s how they do when they want you to remember something” (AGOM, 8).

What is to be remembered here with these designations is the difference of social classes. Janey wants Snookum to understand that these appellations heist White people in the upper class and Blacks in the lower class. These designations clearly indicate that White people assert their superiority over Blacks. As such, on Marshall Plantation, Blacks should see Whites as their masters, while they should always behave as slaves. Whites refuse to grant Blacks any possibility of mental and social development. Blacks should remain inferior beings, always under their command. The refusal to see Blacks as grown-up people is reinforced by Candy’s answer to Snookum’s question to know why he has to gather old people at Mathu’s when she says: “That’s none of your business, Snookum. You’re nothing but a little boy. Now, get moving and don’t stop running” (AGOM, 5).

Referring to Snookum as “a little boy”, Candy, the White woman stresses the fact he is not only a child that will never grow up to be a man, but also she insists on his manageability, meaning that he is easy to control. It is in this way that Blacks are perceived on Marshall Plantation by Whites. They infantilize them in order to dominate them. Blacks are at the mercy of White like Snookum who must go around the plantation without stopping. Infantilized by their position often marginal on the plantation dominated by Whites, most of Gaines’s characters remain children like Snookum. Snookum’s behavior is the same as Boy Boy in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973). In that novel, Boy Boy has a childish and infantile act. After having three children with his wife Eva, he leaves her for another woman without giving her any money and without worrying about their future. This irresponsible behavior is just like his name Boy Boy, he is and will remain a little boy in his mind. Through these characters (Snookum and Boy Boy), Gaines as well as Morrison reminds us that White people designate Black men using the term “boy”, to signify that they are immature and cannot assume any responsibility. The behavior of Snookum and Boy Boy reflects this immaturity.

Marshall Plantation recounting the past life of Blacks is also found in Cherry's grievance about Fix Boutan's unfair attitude against Blacks. He says "it wasn't Marshall cane anymore. Beau and his family had been leasing all the land the past twenty five, thirty years. The very same land we had worked, our people had worked, our people's people had worked since the time of slavery. Now Mr Beau had it all" (AGOM, 43).

Cherry evokes the injustice they undergo to stress the changes that have taken place on the plantation. The sugar cane symbolizes the ancient times Blacks worked the land for the thriving of their communities. The situation is no longer the same since White farmers represented by Fix Beau have destroyed the cane field with their farming, in the same way they have destroyed Black people's previous way of life. Cherry expresses the pain he feels while crossing the sugar cane field in these terms: "In my old age, when I saw an empty cane field, it always made me feel lonely" (AGOM, 44).

Cherry's loneliness is due to the fact that the empty cane field he is crossing on Marshall Plantation evokes the image of old houses from which people have moved. The tall and blue-green canes on both sides on the road have been destroyed in the same way as the glorious and happy days of the past have disappeared. Cherry's loneliness is a clear symbol of how White people have pushed them from their ancestral land. The symbol of sugar cane is also illustrated in *Cane* (J. Toomer, 1973). That book deals carefully with the vibrancy of Black's life. In Toomer's book, as well as in Gaines's, the sugar cane symbolizes pain that Blacks have experienced when they worked for many years closed to the land. Historical allegory presents Marshall Plantation as a symbol to describe and cause the manifestation of events that have occurred there in the mind of black people to teach them a lesson about their own past and their history.

Like Marshall Plantation used as a symbol to illustrate the history of Blacks on that plantation, the graveyard is also presented as a parable to commemorate their departed parents.

2.2 The Graveyard as a Parable

A Gathering of Old Men, deals with allegorical devices like the parable to portray the graveyard as a symbol by which Black people remember their departed parents. The parable deployed in the novel presents the graveyard as a very important place for Blacks because it conveys them a meaningful message. It reveals that through the graveyard, Blacks must be united to their dear deceased parents. This communion is an opportunity for them to learn that death does not put end to family ties. On the contrary, it permits them to show that they feel affection for their departed parents. Going to the graveyard represents for Blacks a symbolic journey in time and in history since it enables them to relive past events that have happened since slavery. This is why one of them visiting the graveyard said: "that old graveyard had been the burial ground for black folks ever since the time of slavery, and I had grandparents in there" (AGOM, 44).

Going to graveyard is perceived as a return journey to their ancestral roots, since it helps Blacks people to reaffirm their kinship ties. Wandering around the graveyard is like trip a back to their ancestral home where they can see again their relatives. Dirty Red, one of Gaines's characters recognizes the grave of his parents when he says: "my mon, Jude, my pa, François, right there, Uncle Ned right in there" (AGOM,45). Even if they are no longer alive, but the simple fact of seeing their graves gives meaning to his life. He is not an orphan in a literal as well as in the figurative sense. Literally, he has a family, what supposes that he has an origin and a past. So, he is not lonely and lost in a hostile environment. Figuratively, the sight of his parents' grave is a strong emotional support in the sense that he can proudly continue the fight they have undertaken for centuries. In *A Gathering of*

Old Men, the graveyard represents a very important place for Blacks that is why they massively and frequently go there as if they took part in a pilgrimage. The image of pilgrimage is perceived through Dirty Red's sentiment when he says: "Every last one of us was in there visiting our people's graves" (AGOM, 45). This pilgrimage to their family graves has two goals: the first goal is to pray for them so that they will rest in peace. In doing so, they comply with a religious principle dear to the Roman Catholic Church. This Catholic principle advises Christians to pray for the dead people, so that they will have access to the paradise. This religious practice usually takes place in November 1st during the All Saint Day. To that end, Paul, one of Jesus Apostles proclaims: "for the rewards of sin is death: but what God freely gives is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Roman, Chapter 6 Verse 23).

In the novel, the narrator describes Jacob's behavior when he visits the grave of his sister: "he kneeled down at the head of the grave and made the sign of the cross" (AGOM, 45). Following Paul's sermon, Black people populating the fictitious world of Gaines do believe that there is a life after death, and want their deceased relatives to have an eternal life, meaning that they must rest in God's peace. The second goal of the pilgrimage to the graveyard is to show their love for the dear departed. This love is expressed through the pulling of weeds. When White people took control of Marshall Plantation, they did not take care of Blacks' graveyard which is now full of weeds. Black people decide to make it clean so that they will be able to see the grave stones on which the names of their deceased parents are inscribed. The weeds do not only hide the tombstones, but also their whole history. Making them visible by cleaning the graveyard, they also make their history known both to the national and international opinion. Through the graves, they want to show that they have a history and an origin that cannot be cancelled. The graveyard takes on great importance in the realization of their history. It symbolically represents their past and will have an impact on their future since future generations will learn from it. They will learn that their ancestors have lived there and have taken part in the development of the environment they live in. This is why they clean it to avoid the White administration to destroy it. Dirty red, one of the ardent defenders and protectors of the graveyard goes against the attitude of White people saying: "they getting rid of these old graveyards more and more. These White folks coming up today don't have no respect for the dead" (AGOM, 47).

Preserving the integrity of the graveyard is extremely important for Black people because that graveyard will bring future White generations to know that Black people have not only lived on that environment, but have also participated in its evolution. The growth of Marshall Plantation is also connected to Blacks glorious deeds. Accordingly, the dead who rest in peace in their graves should deserve respect and consideration. In addition to the graveyard which is the symbol through which Black people commemorate and honor their dead parents, the swamp appears as an image symbolizing nasty action of Whites towards Blacks ending in their extreme poverty.

2.3 The Swamp as an Image of Poverty

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the swamp is presented as a symbol of poverty and dependence. On Marshall Plantation, the patch of land given to Blacks is unfit for agricultural purposes. Despite the protest made by local Blacks, the situation remains unchanged. Rufe, one of Gaines' characters expresses his helplessness when he says: "we had got the worst land from the start, and no matter how hard we worked it, the people with the best land was go'n always be in front...giving us the worst, that bottom land near the swamps" (AGOM,94). Giving that patch of land to Blacks, Whites are aware that it is uncultivated since it is an area of low-lying, a ground where water collects. Whites know that whatever Blacks' hard working they will not have a good harvest. Starving, they will always depend on them for their survival. If Blacks have a good harvest, they will be wealthy and will free

themselves from Whites authority. To avoid the economic growth of Blacks that Whites consider as a danger, they give them marshy lands where no farming is possible. So, the swamp does not only symbolize poverty but it also symbolizes domination and control. Generally, people living below the poverty line can easily be subjugated, because they are worrying more about their fate and survival than rebelling against their oppressors. The fact of lacking the minimum to survive makes Blacks on Marshall Plantation more docile and dependent on their masters. Depending on masters because of the worst land is also depicted in *Sula* (T. Morrison, 1973). In that novel, the Black community of “medallion” is constituted, following the massive influx of Blacks to the North. This Black community called the “bottom” is located on a hill. It is born as a result of a trick played by a White man to his slave. Not wanting to separate from his slave, he offers him this land making him believe that it is suitable to agriculture. Poor and helpless, the slave has no other choice but to accept this space at the top of the hill that his master presents as the bottom of the paradise. This trick that the White man plays to his slave aims at keeping him not only in total dependence, but also in poverty.

The policy which consists in impoverishing and starving Black people continues with the slave sharecrop system as indicated by Rufe, one of the Black farmers on Marshall plantation: “here, our own Black people had been working this land a hundred years for the Marshall plantation, but when it comes to sharecropping, now they give the best land to the Cajun, who had never set foot on the land before” (AGOM, 94). Rufe declares his opposition to the injustice they undergo because during slavery, the Cajuns were poor whites who did not own land. At the end of slavery, the Cajuns competed with local blacks who were now free. After the Civil War, the Cajuns were given the best plot of lands because they were Whites, while Blacks were progressively forced out the agricultural system in accordance with Rufe’s sentiment stated in the novel.

Dealing with the slave sharecrop system, Samuel Hide explained that it is a type of farming in which families rent small plot of lands from a land owner in return for a portion of their crop to be given to the land owner at the end of the year. He continues to say that in the rural south this was typically practiced by former slaves. With the return of the southern economy in disarray after the abolition of slavery and the devastation of the Civil War, conflict arose during Reconstruction era between many whites land owners attempting to reestablish a labor and free blacks seeking economic independence and autonomy. (S. Hide, 2005. pp. 156-157).

Refusing to give the best lands to Blacks compels them to a life of poverty and creates a new system of bondage that limits economic opportunity.

CONCLUSION

A Gathering of Old Men is a novel that points out symbols which recount events experienced by Blacks on Marshall Plantation. This plantation is itself a metaphor of the ill-treatment inflicted on Blacks during and after slavery. The novel targets elements like tractor, jail, electric chair that symbolically sum up the difficult living and working conditions of Blacks in a world that wants to suppress their existence. Evoking certain factors like the graveyard and the swamp, the novel reminds the ordeals faced by Blacks to reach the social status they have today. It is this symbolism that the novel brings out.

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