

Gaines's Preachers and Their People:  
Personalism, Community, and Social Action in *A Lesson Before Dying*, *In My Father's House*,  
and *A Gathering of Old Men*

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## Chapter 1: Introducing Personalism and the Gainesian Pastor: Examining the Tension Between Faith and Action

### Introduction

Ernest J. Gaines infuses his fiction with a strong sense of place, demonstrating his deep connection to the people and culture of his native Louisiana. Growing up on a plantation, Gaines found his childhood experiences central to the formation of his identity as a man and later as a writer.<sup>1</sup> Although he left Louisiana to pursue an education in California, Gaines discovered a missing piece in the works of literature he studied: the stories of his people.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps atoning for this lack of representation, his fiction centers on the “people back home” (“Miss Jane and I” 10) and reflects his responsibility to tell their stories. Gaines fills his oeuvre with representations of the ordinary, of the human, depicting the struggles facing his fictional communities.<sup>3</sup> Being steeped in the culture of the South, he also views organized religion as an inevitable presence in any community, and his exploration of religion occurs in the context of tight-knit communities. Though attending a Baptist church and a Catholic school as a child, Gaines takes a paradoxical approach to organized religion, claiming that “[n]ot any of them are gonna really cure things” while asserting that believing in a force “greater than what you are” is necessary for survival (*Conversations With Ernest Gaines* 186). This view of religion mirrors a central tension in his

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<sup>1</sup> In “Miss Jane and I,” Gaines cites his aunt, Augusteen Jefferson, as one of his primary influences. Jefferson, who was unable to walk, raised Gaines and his siblings. Growing up, Gaines witnessed nightly conversations between his aunt and those who would come to visit her on the “garry.” These conversations exposed him to the stories and struggles of people in his native Louisiana—stories that would later permeate his fiction (5).

<sup>2</sup> Continuing in “Miss Jane and I,” Gaines explains, “I wanted to see on paper the true reason why those black fathers left home—not because they were trifling or shiftless, but because they were tired of putting up with certain conditions. I wanted to see on paper the small country churches (schools during the week), and I wanted to hear those simple religious songs, those simple prayers—that true devotion” (9-10).

<sup>3</sup> For Gaines, the term “community” does not simply reference a group of people bound to a specific geographical location; instead, the Gainesian community implies a deep sense of kinship. For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to note that each community in Gaines’s novels (*A Lesson Before Dying*, *In My Father’s House*, and *A Gathering of Old Men*) largely shares the same vision of what constitutes social action.

novels: reconciling the value for community and importance of social change with the established Church.

Despite Gaines's paradoxical beliefs, some critics polarize his treatment of religion, arguing that the Divine is either apathetic toward human affairs or is an impediment to social change. Holding that organized religion is a central component of Gaines's fiction, Lee Papa claims that institutional Christianity functions as another means of oppressing the black community, arguing that the Church preaches a gospel of contentment to teach its members to remain passive in spite of their suffering (188). William Nash arrives at an opposite conclusion and argues that one of Gaines's pastors, Reverend Ambrose of *A Lesson Before Dying*, is an effective preacher who positively impacts his community (347). Current criticism, however, fails to acknowledge the deeper theological implications in Gaines's marriage of community and institutional Christianity, and using Catholic personalism<sup>4</sup> as a lens to view his treatment of the Church more fully reveals the tension between Christianity and social action<sup>5</sup> in his novels.

As Gaines does not explicitly adhere to personalism,<sup>6</sup> we cannot expect him to offer a simple, neatly-packaged answer on how to reconcile Christianity with social action in the context of his fictional communities. To do so would be merely speculative, overlooking the interplay of religion with the cultural and historical contexts surrounding three of his novels: *A Lesson Before*

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<sup>4</sup> In "Personalism and Traditional Afrikan Thought," Rufus Burrow, Jr. provides a general definition of this philosophical system: "Personalism is any philosophy which holds that reality is personal and that human persons are the highest—not the only—intrinsic values . . . In addition, personalism maintains that the universe is a society of interacting selves and persons with God at the center" (324). Burrow writes that personalism can apply to both monotheistic and polytheistic religions (323), so it is important to anchor our discussion of personalism in its Catholic context, as Gaines' novels are anchored in a largely-Catholic region of the South.

<sup>5</sup> In using the term "social action," I am referencing the specific actions that the Gainesian communities want to take to combat injustice. Often, the community's vision for social action is vastly different than that of the Church—a primary tension in the three novels under examination.

<sup>6</sup> Although Gaines never declares that he follows the tenets of personalist theology, the primary tenets of personalism—the reality of a personal God, belief in inherent human dignity, and the value for community and social action—surface in his fiction, further justifying this study.

*Dying*, *In My Father's House*, and *A Gathering of Old Men*. Taken together, these novels span the duration of the Civil Rights Movement and center on the injustices facing the Gainesian communities before the movement's inception, during its height, and after its end. Though anchored in different decades, each novel explores the tension between the Church—manifested through its ministers—and the community, which suggests that this tension between faith and social action is a central concern facing the black community.

Each pastor—Reverend Ambrose of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Reverend Martin of *In My Father's House*, and Reverend Jameson of *A Gathering of Old Men*—reflects this tension between institutional Christianity and social action. On the surface, their respective communities typically dismiss the preachers as impotent<sup>7</sup> and ineffectual, marginalizing them for failing to adhere to the same vision for social action. While their distance from the community seems to contradict one of the primary tenets of personalism, it is important to note that these pastors are fundamentally human and flawed—just like the communities they serve—yet continue to pursue the good of their communities. Through viewing Gaines's preachers through a personalist lens, we see the tensions inherent in reconciling faith with the need for social change, as these novels ultimately pose questions of the Church's role in combatting injustice in a community.

### **The Image of the Preacher: A Justification**

As Gaines peoples his fiction with these impotent yet devoted preachers, the perception of black pastors in America further justifies the examination of these men and their paradoxical embodiment of personalist theology. Tracing the genesis of the black church to the days of slavery, William H. Becker argues that these pastors provided a model of manhood, power, and

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<sup>7</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “impotence” as the “want to strength or power to perform anything; utter inability or weakness; helplessness” (Def. 1). Although impotence can be related to sexual performance, such a definition is outside the scope of this thesis. I will primarily use the word “impotent” to reference the Gainesian pastors' inability to incite significant social change in their communities.

intelligence, appealing to the slaves who were stripped of their personhood: “. . . the preacher was manifestly a man and a leader of men. In addition to whatever other symbolic functions he had, he symbolized self-assertive masculinity and integrity for the slaves who watched and heard him” (181). Consequently, the figure of the masculine, powerful preacher perpetuated the view that Christianity can—and should—be reconciled with social action, as these preachers subverted white perceptions of their intelligence and mental capacity through interpreting Scripture and leading congregations of oppressed slaves. Both the slaves and their pastors shared the same vision for social action—political and personal freedom—so there was little discrepancy between their Christian faith and its manifestation in the community. However, we see a shift from the slave pastor to the contemporary preacher whose influence—or lack thereof—permeates the pages of Gaines’s fiction.

Departing from this image of the active, masculine slave preacher, the ministers in the three novels under examination exemplify the growing tension between their faith and their community’s vision for social action, which complicates their embodiment of personalist theology. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Reverend Mose Ambrose seeks to fulfill his duties as a minister through supporting Miss Emma and converting Jefferson. Emphasizing the young prisoner’s spiritual needs over his physical ones, the preacher overlooks the underlying reason behind Jefferson’s death sentence: the failure of the justice system to affirm his innocence. By contrast, Grant Wiggins largely ignores the spiritual and instead endeavors to teach Jefferson—an aim that exemplifies the men’s competing visions of social action and positions them as opposing forces in the community. Although Reverend Ambrose is ultimately impotent and unable to change the political and social situation of his slice of the pre-Civil Rights South, he still goes with the young man to the electric chair (*A Lesson* 254), solidifying his devotion to his

community and embodiment of personalist theology. Reverend Martin of *In My Father's House*, though active in his community, deviates from the communal goal of protesting a Cajun storeowner's treatment of black workers and instead forsakes the communal for the individual, seeking to reconcile with his bastard son. Martin's life reflects a division between his private demons and public persona, and this struggle simultaneously reveals his ineptitude while humanizing him, exposing his paradoxical embodiment of personalism. The apparent distance between the Gainesian preacher and his community culminates in *A Gathering of Old Men*, as Reverend Jameson seems noticeably distant and ineffectual.<sup>8</sup> While the community's elderly men want to assert their dignity using whatever means necessary, including violence, Reverend Jameson vehemently opposes their aims, yet his presence highlights his desire to ensure the safety of his community. Ultimately, the tensions between these three preachers and their communities is indicative of the difficulty in reconciling Christianity with competing plans for social action. Gaines's preachers cannot be entirely demonized or revered for their interaction with their communities, supporting Becker's assertion that the black church "goes beyond the simple either/or of passive submission and active resistance to encompass the realm of communal nurture in which a people develops and symbolizes its answer(s) to the question, 'What does it mean to be a man?'" (179-80). In the context of Gaines's novels, the division between the preachers and their communities stems from their different perceptions on how to assert their dignity and personhood—a fundamentally personalist concern—in a society bent on denying black rights.

### **Historical Background: The Development of Personalism**

Before seeing the impact of personalist theology on these preachers spanning the duration

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<sup>8</sup> Lou Dimes, one of the novel's fifteen narrators, offers his assessment of Reverend Jameson: "I looked at the preacher, standing away from the rest. Pathetic, bald, weary-looking little man. He was the only one there who seemed frightened" (*A Gathering* 61).

of the Civil Rights Movement, we must understand the full development of this doctrine.

Although personalism began flourishing in America in the late nineteenth century,<sup>9</sup> the Catholic personalism of Pope John Paul II, as well as the African-American personalism of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is of primary importance for this study of the preachers in these novels. Gaines's strong ties to Louisiana, a region heavily influenced by Catholicism, further justifies the application of personalism to his fiction, as this theology merges the religious influence with his connection to the black community.<sup>10</sup> While Catholic personalism precedes the culmination of African-American personalism in the 1960s, both offshoots of this theology are rooted in oppression. This shared history of oppression—along with Gaines's connection to Catholic Louisiana—merits the application of personalist theology to the ministers in these novels.

The full development of Catholic personalism partially stems from the occupation of Poland following World War II, as the nation's Catholic population was forced to reconcile Christian faith with competing communist ideologies. Karol Wojtyla, the Polish cardinal who would later become Pope John Paul II, pursued doctoral work in his native country following its communist occupation and became increasingly drawn toward personalism.<sup>11</sup> According to John Hellman, the unstable political situation made personalism more appealing to young, Polish Catholics—like the future Pope: “Personalism was a handy rallying cry which enabled a younger

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<sup>9</sup> In Paul Deats's “Introduction to Boston Personalism,” he notes that Borden Parker Bowne, Albert C. Knudson, and Edgar S. Brightman—all professors at Boston University—are credited with the genesis of personalism in the United States (6). Later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would come to study personalism at Boston University and appropriate its tenets to his approach to nonviolent resistance, which links personalism with the black community and one of the primary civil rights leaders.

<sup>10</sup> Gaines scholar Marcia Gaudet writes on the “cultural Catholicism” prevalent in Louisiana. This version of Catholicism is not just “a religion lived and practiced,” but it “affects the cultural beliefs, practices, worldview and identity of the majority of the people” (n. pag.). Essentially, cultural Catholicism does not always reflect the strict adherence to Catholic doctrine but instead reflects a loose identification with the religious tradition and practices.

<sup>11</sup> John Hellman asserts that French personalism, espoused by thinkers like Emmanuel Mounier and Jacques Maritain during the 1930s, preceded personalism's flourishing in Poland by approximately ten years. Like in Poland, communist forces also occupied France, which increased the appeal of a philosophy that champions human dignity (409).

generation of [...] Polish Catholics to work towards a new political and social orientation, and new ways of living their religious commitments” (410). As communist ideology<sup>12</sup> hinges on the loss of individuality, personalism provides a corrective for this ideology, advocating the inherent dignity of all human beings—both the oppressed and the oppressors. While personalism reclaims the value of individuals, Hellman asserts that it also “provided an excellent means for Christians who were ‘of the Left’ or sympathetic to certain features of socialism but religiously orthodox, to situate themselves over against Marxism and the Communist Movement” (411). For Catholics like Pope John Paul II, the socialist emphasis on the communal good was appealing, yet Marxist thought proved to be problematic because it denied the transcendent. Because the foundation of personalism is the existence of a personal God, this theology esteems individual personhood and human communities as reflections of the Divine, giving meaning to those suffering under the weight of oppression.

Coupling his experiences in post-World War II Poland with traditional Church teachings, John Paul II anchors his approach to personalism in the Thomistic conception of personhood. In his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas provides his definition of a person in response to church leaders’ attempts to explain and clarify their position on the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ. In an essay on “Thomistic Personalism,” John Paul II paraphrases Aquinas’ original definition and argues that a person possesses a “rational nature” and is “a subsistent subject of existence and action”(167), appropriating these characteristics to God Himself and arguing that God, too, is personal. Rooted in this relationship between personhood and action, the Thomistic conception of personalism lends itself to an examination of Gaines’s preacher figures who

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<sup>12</sup> Although the flourishing of Catholic personalism in Europe is discussed in the context of the communist occupation of Poland and France, I will not examine Gaines’s novels through a Marxist lens. To do so would be to undercut the reality of the transcendent, which would be antithetical to my purpose of exploring the tension between faith and action in the black community and in the lives of Gaines’s pastors.

oppose the community's vision of what constitutes personhood and appropriate social action. In contrast to Gaines's religious men, John Paul II continues to affirm the concrete, applicable nature of personalism, claiming that "[its] meaning is largely practical and ethical: it is concerned with the person as a subject and an object of activity, as a subject of rights" ("Thomistic Personalism" 165). His definition of personalism is especially applicable to this study, as knowledge of our value requires action that upholds our dignity as humans.<sup>13</sup> Seemingly contradicting Catholic personalism, the preachers in the three novels struggle to connect God's abstract existence to the physical world marred by injustice, as their conception of dignity and action differs from their communities'.

As personalism highlights the tension between faith and action in Gaines's novels, Pope John Paul II's elaboration on the definition of personhood adds another layer to the preachers' paradoxical personalism. In *Love and Responsibility*, John Paul II expounds on the Thomistic view of personhood, stating that "the person is a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love" (41). Drawing from this definition, personalism encompasses two basic standards for human action and behavior: that persons are not to be used but are to be loved<sup>14</sup> and respected. He positions personalism and utilitarianism as diametrically opposed and offers a couple definitions of the verb *to use*, both of which center on the objectification of a person and the treatment of said person "as a means to an end" (*Love and Responsibility* 25), claiming that we cannot fully love those we view only in terms of their usefulness. These principles mirror the

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<sup>13</sup> In an interview with Elsa Saeta and Izora Skinner, Gaines asserts his goal as a writer: "I think what I try to do in my fiction is to show that there comes a time in one's life—in everybody's life—not only in my character's but in your life and mine and everyone else's—when dignity demands that you act" (*Conversations with Ernest Gaines* 242).

<sup>14</sup> Pope John Paul II offers his definition of love in *Love and Responsibility*: "It should be emphasized here that love is the fullest realization of the possibilities inherent in man. The potential inherent in the person is the most fully actualized through love. The person finds in love the greatest possible fullness of being, of objective existence. Love is an activity, a deed which develops the existence of the person to its fullest" (82).

tensions in Gaines's fiction since these novels contrast the oppression of Louisiana blacks with the proper treatment a person deserves. Even though the preachers struggle with impotence, they still embody the Catholic definition of a person and, as a result, should be respected and not be viewed solely on their usefulness to a particular community. The Catholic conception of a person complicates Gaines's critique of the Church, positioning personalism as a means of both criticism and restoration.

Although the Catholic definition of personhood applies to Gaines's preachers, they gradually become disconnected from the people in their communities, a central criticism on the ineffective nature of the Church, while still seeking to uphold their own personhood. Burrow affirms the importance—and even inevitability—of living in community and argues that we “cannot truly be . . . person[s] apart from some group or community” (“Afrikan-American Contributions to Personalism” 164). Pope John Paul II, though situating personalism in the context of Catholic theology,<sup>15</sup> affirms the centrality of community and claims that love between persons naturally results in the desire to subordinate the individual will to the total good of the community. Consequently, “[t]he person no longer wishes to be its own exclusive property, but instead to become the property of that other. This means the renunciation of its autonomy and its inalienability” (*Love and Responsibility* 125). Here, Pope John Paul II speaks to the mutual interdependence and action that occurs in a tight-knit community—an aspect of personalism that the Gainesian pastors simultaneously uphold and depart from.

### **Protests and Personalism: Decades of Social Change**

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas D. Williams highlights the Trinitarian nature of community in *Who Is My Neighbor? Personalism and the Foundations of Human Rights*, asserting that “[f]rom the perspective of divine revelation, then, the human person's relational dimension derives from his creation in the image and likeness of God, who is the first *communio personarum*. The Father communicates his entire Self to the Son. . . . The three-way communication among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit begets a perfect communion, which in turn is the exemplar of all human interpersonal relationships” (211-12).

Though flourishing in Boston in the late nineteenth century and in Europe after World War II, the outworking of personalism culminates in the United States during the beginning of the protest movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Instead of being relegated to the academy, personalism became a means of justifying political protest. James J. Farrell, author of *The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism*, claims that these decades of social change brought with them the “understanding that the personal is political” and that “everyday life is an arena of politics” (5). In the years leading up to the Civil Rights and anti-war movements characteristic of the 1960s, protesters upheld several of the tenets of personalism through seeking to affirm their dignity through whatever means necessary.<sup>16</sup> While Farrell outlines several characteristics of political personalism, he begins by claiming that “the genesis of Sixties protest was Genesis” (6). The belief that God created man in His image and set him apart from the other animals provided a basis for these protests as people—even those groups marginalized by governmental policies<sup>17</sup>—acted to affirm their sacredness. As an attempt to affirm human dignity and incite social change, personalists of the 1960s sought to affirm their individuality yet viewed the political realm as a place to show “love in action” (Farrell 7). For the new generation of personalists, the love of community (and even the marginalized) drove human action.<sup>18</sup>

Before the culmination of the protest movement in the 1960s, the Catholic Worker Movement embodied the personalist value of the dignity of human life and used faith as a lens to see the need for social change, providing a precursor for Gaines’s novels. On June 15, 1955, a group of protestors from various organizations, including the Catholic Worker Movement and

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<sup>16</sup> Some well-known personalist thinkers, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., utilized methods of nonviolent resistance in order to affirm the sacredness and dignity of human beings. Dr. King’s personalism will be discussed in a later section of this introduction.

<sup>17</sup> Civil rights advocates and anti-war demonstrators were the primary groups to appropriate personalism to the developing protest movement.

<sup>18</sup> In *Love and Responsibility*, Pope John Paul II affirms the connection between love and personalist thought—an idea that extends to Gaines’s novels and will be explored later in this introduction.

the War Resisters League, gathered to protest the protocols for surviving nuclear war. Members of the Catholic Worker Movement, most notably Dorothy Day, staged this protest as “penance” for the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—two acts of destruction and violence credited for ending World War II (Farrell 21-22). Despite the Catholic Workers’ aversion to violence, their pacifism cannot be equated with passivity. Since the inception of the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933, Farrell argues, the organization embraced a personalism that affirmed human dignity and “decried violence to persons in modern institutions, including war, the nation-state, and both Marxist and capitalist economies” (22). Because of the value placed on human life, participants in the Catholic Worker Movement were willing to protest any governmental policies that undermined that sense of inherent value.

Being associated with the Church, the protests of the Catholic Worker Movement stemmed from the interpretation of the Gospel; however, the beliefs of this organization also introduce the division between personalist action and organized Christianity—a theme that extends to Ernest Gaines’s works. Farrell aptly summarizes the Catholic Workers’ paradoxical view of the Church:

[They] were inspired not just by the natural law philosophy of human rights and responsibilities but by the social gospel of love, not just by the encyclicals but also by the radical Christianity of Jesus and the early church. They often saw the institutional church as a scandal, with “plenty of charity but too little justice.” And they advocated not just the standard Left program of legislation and neighborhood organization, but personalist action to solve social problems. As far as possible, they hoped to be the word made flesh, an embodiment of Christ’s love. (29)

This concern over the Church's effectiveness in fighting injustices mirrors the tensions in *A Lesson Before Dying*, *In My Father's House*, and *A Gathering of Old Men*, as Gaines presents a paradoxical view of religion that positions personalism as both an indictment on—and antidote for—the Church's ignorance of tangible injustices. Because personalism connects the doctrine of inherent human dignity to action, the failure of Gaines's preachers to act in accordance to their community's vision for social action adds to their impotence and informs the critique of the Church as being divorced from human suffering. The preachers' ineptitude, however, points to the reality of a solution, alluding to the possibility of reconciling Christianity with social action if the Church seeks to relieve both the physical and spiritual suffering of the oppressed—much like the Catholic Worker Movement (Farrell 33). At its most effective, personalism, like that of the Catholic Worker Movement, links organized Christianity with social action and reveals that religion does not have to be incompatible with progress.

### **Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Embodiment of African-American Personalism**

Due primarily to this tenet of communal action, civil rights advocates added to the tradition of personalist theology, and it is this personalism and the tension between faith and action that Gaines explores in these three novels. During the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s blend of personalism and protest suggests that organized Christianity can actually promote justice and work to end oppression. Connecting to his earlier claims linking personalism to the political sphere, Farrell concludes that the Civil Rights Movement naturally lent itself to personalism because simple actions, such as drinking from the wrong water fountain, had political implications (81). Dr. King's involvement in personalism merges the philosophy's academic roots with its more contemporary manifestations since he studied under well-known teachers like Edgar Sheffield Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf at Boston

University. Like many of these earlier personalists, King embraced the belief in a personal God who created humans in His image. Because human persons reflect the image of their Creator, he opposed racial segregation on the grounds that it “stands diametrically opposed to the sacredness of human personality. It debases personality” (qtd. in Farrell 83). This high regard for the sacredness of human life informed Dr. King’s personalist theology and prompted him to protest laws and social practices that undermine the truth of black personhood. To some extent, Gaines’s preachers couple the sacredness of human life with their vision for social action—though that vision differs from that of their communities. Reverend Ambrose, for instance, refuses to esteem Jefferson as a brutish animal and instead sees him as a man with a soul. Out of this understanding of Jefferson’s humanity, the preacher simply pursues what is, for him, the most natural course of action: preaching to the prisoner. Unlike Reverend Ambrose, Reverend Martin of *In My Father’s House* participates in political demonstrations, yet his understanding of his bastard son’s personhood prompts him to act to atone for his past inaction—even if it means forsaking the community. For these novels spanning the course of the Civil Rights Movement, personalism provides the preachers with an opportunity to merge the seemingly disparate worlds of Christianity and communal concerns for the purpose of upholding the dignity of the individual members of the community.

Dr. King’s method of nonviolence served as a way to uphold the dignity of African-American personhood while simultaneously protesting the oppressive social conditions, and his actions reflected a Christianity that was synonymous with social justice. Similar to the controversy over the Catholic Workers’ pacifistic, anti-war leanings, it is important to note that Dr. King’s decision to use nonviolent action to protest the South’s segregation laws is not indicative of a deeper passivity. Farrell comments on the minister’s protest strategies, claiming

that his “nonviolent personalism was embodied, but instead of ministering to the hurt bodies of society’s victims, King encouraged society’s victims to use their own bodies for social change” (93). The discrepancy between the inactive Church and personalism underscores the need for the recovery of the personalist values of human dignity, community, and action, and Gaines’s novels reflect both this critique of passivity and value of personalism for a community.

### **Personhood, Community, and Ernest J. Gaines**

Personalist theology, along with Gaines’s fiction, resists the idea of isolation and instead highlights the importance of the communal good, criticizing social and religious institutions that fail to uphold the value of human dignity and community. In “Personalism and Traditional Afrikan Thought,” Burrow argues that “the church exists for the person and not the other way around” (347) and that churches should be judged and evaluated on the extent to which they meet the needs of the community. Representing their churches, the preachers in Gaines’s novels struggle to uphold this vision for communal action as they simultaneously affirm the personalist value for community yet differ in their views on appropriate social action. Gaines’s emphasis on community is consistent with the tenets of personalism, illuminating his critique on the insufficiency of the institutional Church because of its lack of response to injustice. While providing a lens with which to critique the Church, the presence of personalism in Gaines’s novels also affirms the value of Christian institutions in the life of a community, exposing the tensions between reconciling faith and action.

Chapter 2: Soul Man: Reverend Ambrose's Ineptitude and Value for Community in *A Lesson Before Dying*

Much of Gaines's fiction centers on the importance of community, and Reverend Mose Ambrose of *A Lesson Before Dying* serves as a representation of the Church's role in the community. At the beginning of the novel, he sits with Miss Emma—Jefferson's godmother—as she listens to the public defender say that her godson is no better than a mere animal (7). Reverend Ambrose is there as the judge sentences Jefferson to death, is there in his prison cell at Miss Emma's request, and is there at the electric chair. His devotion to Miss Emma mirrors personalism's emphasis on community and demonstrates one of the central aims of the Church—to serve the needs of a community.<sup>19</sup> Despite Ambrose's presence throughout the novel, Grant Wiggins—the young, cynical teacher—views the preacher as a relic of an outdated system of Christianity that has little effect on the lives of his people. While Grant views Reverend Ambrose as impotent and ineffectual, this indictment adds another layer of complexity to the preacher's character. Both Reverend Ambrose and Grant have different conceptions of social action—the preacher endeavoring to convert Jefferson and the teacher seeking to help Jefferson realize his humanity. In opposing Grant's vision for progress, the preacher appears antagonistic toward the concerns of the younger black community, yet he still provides support for Miss Emma and Tante Lou, revealing the paradoxes in his embodiment of personalism.<sup>20</sup> Although personalism affirms the value of social action, the division between Reverend Ambrose and Grant reflects the tensions inherent in reconciling faith with action, as the interplay of his impotence and

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<sup>19</sup> Burrow comments on personalism's communal focus in the context of the Church and argues that “[a]ny value that the church has must be ‘measured by its ministry to humanity’” (347).

<sup>20</sup> Reverend Ambrose's paradoxical approach to personalism refers to his simultaneous impotence and humanness. Though Grant perceives him as impotent because he is unable to change the injustice underlying Jefferson's death sentence, he is still human—flawed yet devoted to his community.

humanness manifests itself in his deviation from Grant's definition of social action yet his devotion to the community.

Before analyzing the complex nature of Reverend Ambrose's character and role in the community, it is important to emphasize the primacy of community reflected in Grant's commentary on Jefferson's trial, which provides a context for the examination of personalism and communal action. Grant Wiggins's opening statements reveal his conception of community as he admits, "I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial. I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be. Still, I was there" (3). This paradoxical admission shows that Grant experiences a strong tie to his community even when physically separated from his people, as the Ganesian community transcends physical location and implies a deeper—and almost spiritual—kinship. Grant's narration reflects this connection, and he can say claim that he was at the trial because the lawyer's decision to sentence Jefferson to death affects the black community. This sense of interrelatedness perpetuates the view that the fate of one member of the community affects the whole, which reflects personalism's emphasis on human connectedness and responsibility. Pope John Paul II's personalism, as described in *Love and Responsibility*, is particularly applicable here, as Catholicism pervades the culture of Gaines's Louisiana. Since the development of Catholic personalism is linked to oppression,<sup>21</sup> it reflects a shared history with the oppressed black community. Couched within his definition of love, John Paul II affirms the personalist value for community and human relationships: "For a human being is always first and foremost himself . . . and in order not merely to live with another but to live by and for that other person he must continually discover himself in the other and the

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<sup>21</sup> Critic John Hellman mentions that John Paul II studied in his native Poland during the communist occupation of the country following World War II, becoming increasingly interested in personalism after seeing the perversion of the Marxist value for community and the communist suppression of individualism (411).

other in himself" (*Love and Responsibility* 131). The Catholic view of human relationships mirrors a central theme in Gaines's oeuvre: people cannot fully live—or thrive—without community. Because his fictional communities resist the idea of isolation, its members must act in relation to one another, undergoing the process of self-discovery in the context of community. For Grant Wiggins, then, Jefferson's trial forces him to confront the need for social action in combatting the injustice facing his community. His initial commentary on Jefferson's trial, which is appropriately the first line of the novel, serves as a precursor of the tension between Grant and Reverend Ambrose's competing definitions of social action. By not attending the trial out of his knowledge of its outcome, Grant initially chooses passivity over action, believing any action to be futile because of the injustice of Jefferson's death sentence. Established in the opening scene, this question of what constitutes effective social action in the context of community is a central tension in the novel, justifying the examination of this tension through a personalist lens.

In addition to emphasizing the centrality of community in this novel, Jefferson's trial illustrates the importance of understanding the doctrine of personhood before analyzing the tension between faith and action. Implicated for a murder he did not commit, Jefferson must rely on the testimony of his defense attorney—a product of the pre-Civil Rights South—to assert his innocence. Though hired as a public defender, the attorney's words assault Jefferson's dignity and mental capacity:

Gentlemen of the jury, look at him—look at him—look at this. Do you see a man sitting here? Do you see a man sitting here? . . . Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand—look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan—can plan—anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out

of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa—yes, yes, that he can do—but to plan? (7)

The lawyer uses dehumanizing language to describe Jefferson, but his charges also reflect white culture's erroneous perceptions of the black community. Here, Jefferson's public defender brings several stereotypes to the surface, perpetuating beliefs in biological and intellectual inferiority—beliefs that plague Gaines's community. However, the defense attorney's words contradict Catholic personalism's conception of personhood. In *Love and Responsibility*, Pope John Paul II asserts the dignity of all people based on man's creation in God's image.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, man's possession of both a rational nature and a "specific inner self" (*Love and Responsibility* 22) separates him from the rest of creation, including animals. By contrast, the public defender's words are antithetical to Catholic personalism's definition of a person—lies Reverend Ambrose must counter throughout the novel as he helps Jefferson realize that he is a person with a soul.<sup>23</sup>

In spite of the overt racism of these charges against Jefferson's personhood, the defense attorney draws apt conclusions about the communal nature of morality, which upholds the personalist view of ethics and action. Addressing those gathered in the courtroom, he claims that "[w]e must live with our own conscience" (8). It is important to note that this collective conscience applies to both the jurors and the listeners, illustrating the moral dimension of the jury's decision to execute the innocent Jefferson—a crime against his personhood. To Borden Parker Bowne,<sup>24</sup> one of the first personalists in the American academy, morality and community are inseparable. Bishop Francis J. McConnell summarizes Bowne's conception of ethics and

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<sup>22</sup> See Genesis 1:26-27, NIV.

<sup>23</sup> Grant also seeks to help Jefferson understand that he is human, yet he does not believe in the soul's existence.

<sup>24</sup> Bowne was one of the forerunners of the American development of personalism in Boston. Though Bowne developed his personalism in the late nineteenth century, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would later come to study personalist theology under one of Bowne's colleagues, Edgar S. Brightman. Because Bowne's views reflect the tenets of American personalism, his inclusion in this study is warranted.

morality, noting that Bowne defines morality as an ethical system that seeks to preserve the good of both individuals and communities. As a result, any act that threatens this sense of personhood and communal good is immoral (McConnell 33). While the defense attorney's charges against Jefferson undercut the personalist aim of upholding individual dignity, his statements about morality and the collective conscience ironically support Bowne's conception of morality and community. By using the collective "we," Jefferson's defense attorney unwittingly implicates himself for his failure to embody personalist ethics through emphasizing the relationship between morality and a community of persons. Though this scene only occupies a small space in the novel, Jefferson's trial highlights the importance of community and reveals the relationship between ethical action and communities—central tenets of personalism.

Moreover, Reverend Ambrose's presence at the trial reflects his devotion to his community as he supports Miss Emma, here embodying Catholic personalism's doctrine of participation. Because Grant narrates the events of the trial, the preacher does not appear until the end of this account, seemingly minimizing his role in the community.<sup>25</sup> However, his presence at the trial shows his loyalty to—and value for—his church members, as he remains seated by Miss Emma for emotional and spiritual support (9). Serving as a representative of the Church, Reverend Ambrose is not removed from Miss Emma or Jefferson's suffering; instead, he actively participates<sup>26</sup> in the life of his community, illuminating a key component of Pope

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<sup>25</sup> Because Grant is the novel's narrator, his perceptions of Reverend Ambrose reflect his own antagonism toward organized religion. However, Grant's antagonistic views of organized religion cannot be conflated with Gaines's views. Instead, the teacher's derision for religion illustrates the tension in reconciling faith with social action.

<sup>26</sup> Because the novel exposes the tension between Reverend Ambrose's faith and activity in the community, this concept of participation is essential in this thesis geared toward examining these tensions.

John Paul II's personalism. In "The Person: Subject and Community,"<sup>27</sup> John Paul II affirms that all human beings exist in the context of community. Because human existence cannot be separated from community, he defines participation as a characteristic of personhood and manifestation of personalism: "To participate in the humanity of another human being means to be vitally related to the other as a particular human being, and not just related to what makes the other (in abstracto) a human being. This is ultimately the basis for the whole distinctive character of the evangelical concept of *neighbor*" (237). Through standing with Miss Emma at Jefferson's trial, Reverend Ambrose shows his willingness to actively participate in his community, revealing his vision for social action. Here, he does not attempt to console Miss Emma with abstract assurances of Divine comfort but is simply *there*. Offering a positive assessment of Reverend Ambrose's character, critic William R. Nash argues that the preacher, in contrast to some of Gaines's other ministers,<sup>28</sup> reflects the possibility for cooperation between the Church and the community (347). Even in the opening chapters of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Reverend Ambrose's presence expresses his desire to support the suffering members of the community like Miss Emma, upholding the personalist value of community and reflecting his definition of social action.

As the novel progresses and Miss Emma petitions Henri Pichot to allow Jefferson to have visitors, her commentary on Reverend Ambrose complicates the Church's role in the novel, and she seems to advocate a view of Christianity that is incompatible with daily living in the community, introducing the division between the Church and social action. Miss Emma asks Pichot to persuade Sheriff Guidry to give her and Grant permission to visit Jefferson in his cell.

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Pope John Paul II publishes his *Person and Community* the same year that *A Lesson Before Dying* was published.

<sup>28</sup> Nash briefly mentions the impotence of Reverend Phillip Martin of *In My Father's House* and Reverend Jameson of *A Gathering of Old Men*. I will explore the tension impotence, action, and personalism as manifested in these ministers in the subsequent chapters.

Pichot tells the older woman to be content with Reverend Ambrose's visits "and keep it at that" (21) — a request that Miss Emma refuses. Responding to Pichot's request, Miss Emma introduces the dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical, explaining, "Yes, sir, I'm concerned for his soul, Mr. Henri . . . I'm concerned for his soul. But I want him to be a man, too, when he go to that chair'" (22). On the surface, Miss Emma's dual concerns show a distinction between the soul and the man, and her vision for social action requires more than Jefferson's spiritual salvation as she longs for her godson to view himself as a human being. Consequently, this distinction advances the view that faith and manhood—the two competing manifestations of social action— are seemingly incompatible.<sup>29</sup>

Accepting the incompatibility of faith and manhood, however, ignores the link between Catholic personalist theology and Christian responsibility, as Miss Emma's statements reflect her deeper concern for Jefferson's personhood. Thomas D. Williams illumines the dichotomy of faith and human dignity, arguing that "[i]n order to be universal, personal dignity could not be a function of intelligence, abilities, accomplishments, moral worth, or baptism, for these factors vary from person to person. It must rather be a function of the human being simply by virtue of his humanity, of his personhood, a natural quality that cannot be acquired or lost" (153). Catholic personalism affirms the inherent dignity of human beings first—apart from their association with any institution or community. In the context of this novel, Miss Emma does not suggest that the salvation of Jefferson's soul is insufficient for daily living. Instead, her words indicate that Jefferson must first view himself as human before he accepts that he has a soul that needs saving, which marries Christian concerns with social action.

Although Miss Emma desires Jefferson's salvation, it is important to note that Reverend

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<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that in Gaines's novels, the concept of manhood is distinguished from masculinity. Phillip Auger defines manhood as the power for self-definition that arises out of an understanding of a person's humanity (85).

Ambrose is missing from those initial visits with the prisoner, which suggests his impotence, yet this absence paradoxically reinforces the personalist values of human dignity and community. Grant's first conversation with Jefferson shows that the young man has appropriated the public defender's words, seeing himself as little more than an animal because "[y]oumans" (83) are not confined to a prison cell. Jefferson's dialect here is especially significant—with his word for *human* made up of the words "you" and "man"—and reveals that he views himself as an animal separate from other men. Responding to Jefferson's self-imposed dehumanization, Grant repeatedly tells the young man that he is human (83), and this understanding of humanity must precede Reverend Ambrose's work with the young prisoner because by viewing himself as an animal, Jefferson denies the existence of both his rational nature and his soul. Conversely, John Paul II argues that the rational nature distinguishes a person from an object and the reality of the soul, "a specific inner self" (*Love and Responsibility* 22) that separates humans from animals. By not being present during these visits with Jefferson, Reverend Ambrose provides time for Jefferson to realize his humanity, and this act itself is a form of social action. This absence does not mean that the Church is removed from Jefferson's suffering but paradoxically reinforces the personalist values of community and human dignity, complicating the tension between the Church and social action.

Reverend Ambrose becomes a more prominent character following Grant's initial visits with Jefferson, and the questions he asks the teacher reflect the personalist emphasis on community and human dignity. Seated with Miss Emma and Tante Lou, the preacher asks Grant a series of questions, the wording of which illuminates the central tenets of Catholic personalism:

"Deep in you, what you think? Reverend Ambrose suddenly turned from looking out into the darkness. "Deep in you?"

“About what, Reverend?”

“Him? What’s he thinking? What’s he thinking about deep in him? Deep in you, what you think?” (100)

Through posing these questions to Grant, Reverend Ambrose embodies Catholic personalism’s focus on community arising from a sense of human dignity. Ambrose affirms that Jefferson is capable of “deep” (100) thought, which affirms the young man’s rational nature—a defining characteristic of personhood. Adding to the connection between personhood and rationality, Williams argues that human dignity must be inherent, a fundamental characteristic of the person and not of his intellect. If value is linked solely to our intellectual capabilities, then human dignity is conditional—a view that contradicts the teachings of William’s Catholic personalism (153). While the preacher recognizes Jefferson’s capacity for thought and introspection, his questions also emphasize his connection to—and attempt at cooperation with—his community. Reverend Ambrose’s cooperation stems from his devotion to Miss Emma as a member of his church, and he is willing—at least here—to work with Grant. By asking Grant these questions, Ambrose reflects the need for communal interdependence as he sees that the teacher might have answers where his own knowledge about Jefferson is lacking. Here, the preacher admits his own human limitations through seeking Grant’s opinion and reinforces his connection to the concerns of his community and his willingness to act on them.

Although Ambrose attempts to forge a connection between the Church and the needs of the community, Grant shows derision for the preacher’s simplicity and connects this simplicity with inaction, complicating the man’s embodiment of personalism. Grant focuses on Ambrose’s lack of education, claiming that the older man merely “heard the voice and started preaching” (101). In his description of the preacher, Grant contrasts education with religious experience and

views Ambrose's faith as antithetical to reason. Grant prides himself on being educated, so Reverend Ambrose's response to the call to preach seems subjective and even irrational.<sup>30</sup> Viewing the preacher's profession as opposed to education, Grant loosely connects Ambrose's lack of education with the lack of progress—and substantial action—in the community. In his critique of cultural Christianity,<sup>31</sup> Boston personalist Borden Parker Bowne observes the tendency of American Christians to fail to connect their abstract beliefs to their tangible experiences (12-13). Bowne indicts passive Christianity and instead claims that belief should naturally incite action, or “result in righteousness” (295). This outcome of righteousness is a form of progress, as Christianity results in action, namely the expression of goodwill toward the community. Grant's characterization of Ambrose undercuts the connection between spiritual righteousness and communal action, and he admits that the minister “christened babies, baptized youths, visited those who were ill, counseled those who had trouble, preached, and buried the dead” but that “[a]ll these things could be simply accomplished” (101). Each of these actions signifies Reverend Ambrose's involvement in his community, yet Grant still derides these acts of goodwill because they were accomplished without the pastor's formal education. Being a teacher, Grant seems to equate education with progress, so the preacher's lack of education translates to his limited ability to promote lasting social change. While Reverend Ambrose serves his community through counseling those who grieve, for example, he can do nothing to change their circumstances and is powerless over life's inevitable struggles. Despite this powerlessness and ineptitude, the preacher is still an active participant in his community, which simultaneously humanizes him and reflects his personalist ideals.

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<sup>30</sup> To the teacher, Ambrose's entrance into the ministry is irrational because he never had any formal theological training (101).

<sup>31</sup> This criticism is not just restricted to Christianity. Early in *Personalism*, Bowne outlines his problems with nineteenth-century philosophy, holding that philosophy should be practical and affect the way men live—not merely confined to abstraction (12-13).

In the context of this conversation with Grant, Reverend Ambrose further asserts his desire to participate in his community by planning his visit with Jefferson, yet he emphasizes the young man's spiritual state over his physical one, highlighting the distinction between the preacher and teacher's visions for social action. Reverend Ambrose quizzes Grant about his conversations with Jefferson and acts appalled when he finds out that the two men had never discussed God and eternity. Grant's response is especially significant, as he admits that his role is to help Jefferson understand what it means to be a man, whereas Reverend Ambrose's role is to discuss spiritual matters (101). This dichotomization of the spiritual and the physical mirrors their dual conceptions of effective social action, with Reverend Ambrose endeavoring to convert Jefferson and Grant seeking to affirm Jefferson's personhood. Frustrated by these differences, the teacher's admission that "[t]here's enough room for both of us" (101) highlights the men's attempts at cooperation, as Grant acknowledges that both can offer Jefferson something—education and Christianity.

In spite of Grant's cynicism toward faith, Reverend Ambrose's focus on Jefferson's spiritual needs makes him an effective preacher since he is expected to provide spiritual guidance; however, his narrow focus on the spiritual makes him an inept personalist, as he is powerless to change the injustice of Jefferson's death sentence. His ignorance of Jefferson's physical conditions undercut the importance Bowne places on freedom. Bowne views freedom as a central component of personalism and defines freedom as an individual's ability to establish a unique identity and to determine the trajectory of his life (199-200). Similar to his critique on both philosophy and institutional Christianity, Bowne rejects the definition of freedom as an abstraction; instead, freedom must be grounded in experience (205). This contrast does not make Reverend Ambrose wholly bad, yet this contrast reveals his humanity and the tension between

faith and the reality of social injustices.

Though his focus on the spiritual is not inherently bad, Reverend Ambrose's expressions of faith initially anger Jefferson because they seem like mere platitudes when neither man can do anything to change his situation, signifying the tension between faith and social action. Ambrose is well intentioned, trying to convince Jefferson that people are praying for him and that he simply needs to trust God. After advising Jefferson to have faith, the preacher becomes the target of Jefferson's hatred (121). This visceral reaction stems from Reverend Ambrose's inability to do anything to alter Jefferson's bleak situation. Believing that he is providing valuable encouragement, Reverend Ambrose advocates action at the spiritual level, though to Grant's scorn. He places responsibility on himself and on Jefferson to act—asserting his intention to pray and exhorting the young man to believe—but these actions will not reverse<sup>32</sup> the prisoner's death sentence. Here, the disconnect between Reverend Ambrose and Jefferson stems from their different conceptions of the word "justice." In *Love and Responsibility*, Pope John Paul II defines justice as "giving others what is rightly due them. A person's rightful due is to be treated as an object of love, not as an object for use. In a sense it can be said that love is a requirement of justice" (42). To Ambrose, withholding the knowledge of salvation from Jefferson would be unjust since the preacher believes that Jefferson's fundamental need is a spiritual one. However, Jefferson's view of justice is linked to his physical freedom, which prompts him to react angrily toward the man who prioritizes the spiritual. This tension between Jefferson and Reverend Ambrose illuminates the paradoxes in the preacher's character and exposes the tension between institutional Christianity and social action.

Reverend Ambrose's pointed statements during the annual Christmas program also

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<sup>32</sup> This is not to imply that Reverend Ambrose's prayers are meaningless. Though his prayers are earnest and reflect his belief in a personal God, the courts would not reverse Jefferson's death sentence.

mirror this concern for salvation, but he uses this speech as an opportunity to chastise Grant for his devotion to education over faith, further revealing the preacher's complexities and the division between him and the community. Grant recounts Reverend Ambrose's words to the congregation: "Again he reminded us that we were not all saved from sin. Even with book learning, we were still fools if we did not have God in our hearts. Again he asked God to go with those locked up in prison cells. He thanked God for all his blessings" (150). Reverend Ambrose's first statement about salvation is not inherently bad; instead, this remark demonstrates his effectiveness as a preacher since he should rightfully be concerned about the congregation's spiritual state. However, his message about those who have "book learning" (150) establishes a dialectic between faith and reason—or Christianity and education. This contrast couples with his pointed remarks and reflects the discrepancy between the minister's values and those of the community, represented by Grant Wiggins' character.

In examining the noticeable tension between Reverend Ambrose and Grant in this scene, it is important to note that the preacher positions his subtle jab at Grant before instructing the congregation to pray for the imprisoned, for Jefferson, revealing the tension between the Church and community. The order in which Reverend Ambrose delivers this speech suggests that he prioritizes his personal struggle with Grant over Jefferson's plight in prison—a motivation that ultimately weakens his role as an effective preacher. In doing so, Ambrose undercuts his responsibility to the community and instead uses his position as a means of expressing a personal vendetta. Although this act is not wholly honorable, it is human. While Reverend Ambrose does desire both Grant and Jefferson's salvation, his position as a preacher does not make him immune to these pointed, accusatory exchanges as he makes known his opposition to Grant's definition of social action and progress.

Because Reverend Ambrose and Grant espouse different values on education, communal action, and the value of the Church,<sup>33</sup> their community is all they have in common; as a result, the disconnect between the two men complicates Reverend Ambrose's appropriation of Catholic personalism. The narrative moves ahead a couple months after the Christmas program, and Reverend Ambrose and Grant go to Henri Pichot's house to find out the date of Jefferson's execution. Seated in the kitchen, the two men have little to talk about except for Tante Lou and school. Although both men express their connection to the community, Reverend Ambrose's failure to connect with Grant is here a personal one. After exhausting their possibilities for conversation, Reverend Ambrose stops talking "because he could not think of anything to say," and Grant affirms that he "had nothing to say to him" (154). The narrator employs matter-of-fact language to accentuate the distance between Grant and Reverend Ambrose, as neither man seems to want work on finding another topic to talk about. For Reverend Ambrose, this resolute decision not to put forth effort in connecting with Grant shows the limitations of his devotion to community. His lack of effort in connecting with Grant seems antithetical to Catholic personalism's emphasis on responsibility to the whole. The preacher finds it easiest to connect to the members of his church, like Miss Emma and Tante Lou, or those who are in need, like Jefferson. The comfort level of these personal interactions simply reflects his position as a pastor where his occupation requires him to support his congregation and serve the needy. In this sense, Reverend Ambrose's personal failures toward Grant demonstrate his unwillingness to engage with people who have different belief systems and definitions of what constitutes appropriate social action. Because the Church is so central to the community, Grant's hostility toward organized religion isolates him from this community. Despite this scorn for the Church and its pastor, Reverend Ambrose still has a responsibility to *all* members of his community—including

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<sup>33</sup> Reverend Ambrose prioritizes the soul whereas Grant prioritizes manhood and human dignity.

the ones he disagrees with. Reverend Ambrose's exchange with Grant both reinforces his duty to his Church and indicts him for failing to uphold the personalist value of community, which adds a level of complexity to the preacher's character.

Grant's derision for the Church culminates as Jefferson's execution draws near, and his criticism underscores the tension between professed faith and tangible action. After hearing news of Jefferson's execution date, Grant issues a weighty indictment on the Church and the professing Christians in the community who sentenced Jefferson to death:

And on Friday too. Always on Friday. Same time as He died, between twelve and three. But they can't take this one's life too soon after the recognition of His death, because it might upset the sensitive few. It can happen less than two weeks later, though, because even the sensitive few will have forgotten about their Savior's death by then. (158)

Through this commentary on the Church's response to the impending execution, Grant essentially charges the church with inaction, scorning the inconsistency between belief and action. Furthermore, his statement reveals a contrast between the "sensitive few" and their practical belief in "their Savior" (158). Referring to Christ as Savior is intensely personal, and the use of the pronoun "their" (158) further emphasizes this personal relationship, making Grant's indictment on the Church even more striking. To Grant, professing Christ as Savior has little effect on human action, yet this criticism of the Church contradicts the personalist emphasis on action resulting from a proper understanding of God and community. In his examination of personalism's roots in the United States, Paul Deats claims that the Boston personalists looked at all social institutions—including the Church—with a critical eye. Analyzing the effectiveness of such institutions, early American personalists sought to alleviate human suffering and work to

counteract evil (12). In contrast to these early personalists, however, the Church<sup>34</sup> (including Reverend Ambrose) fails to counteract the injustice responsible for Jefferson's imprisonment and eventual death, which widens the gap between faith and action.

While Reverend Ambrose's ineptitude perpetuates the view that Christianity is associated with passivity, he advocates drawing strength from God—his conception of social action that ironically isolates him from his community. When Grant refuses to tell Miss Emma the news about Jefferson's execution, Reverend Ambrose quips that the teacher would be strong enough if he drew that strength and ability from God (158). To the preacher, this spiritual strength allows him to participate in the in Miss Emma's suffering and show his support for the older woman, upholding the personalist value of community. Divine strength, then, is compatible with social action, as Reverend Ambrose acknowledges the need for Divine assistance in supporting his community. However, Grant reiterates his belief that the preacher's role is to handle anything spiritual (159), which highlights the division between the men's views of social action.

Although Reverend Ambrose draws strength from God for Miss Emma's sake, he does so at the expense of those outside the Church's influence, namely Grant. By emphasizing the necessity of relying on a personal God, Ambrose capitalizes on Grant's earlier affirmation of leaving the faith and brings up God almost as a means of defense. In asserting his belief in God's strength, Reverend Ambrose positions himself as Grant's superior because he has something that the teacher lacks—Divine resources. This scene reinforces Ambrose's paradoxical nature, as he simultaneously wants Grant to acknowledge his need for the Divine while he still engages in a power struggle with the young teacher. Such a paradox underscores the preacher's humanity as he seeks to assert both the strength of his faith and the power of his influence in the community.

After this exchange with the minister, Grant muses on Miss Emma's desire for him to

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teach Jefferson what it means to be a man, and his characterization of Reverend Ambrose ironically mirrors personalist principles in his commentary on the soul and community. Angry and despairing over the news of Jefferson's execution, Grant questions why Miss Emma does not make Reverend Ambrose visit her godson alone. His conclusion that Miss Emma wants "memories of [Jefferson] standing like a man" (166) indicates the relationship between the soul and human dignity. Reverend Ambrose's presence is valuable as he points Jefferson to an awareness of the Divine, but Miss Emma's longing to see her godson assert himself as a man carries implications for daily living in the community, mirroring the dichotomy of faith and action.

To illuminate the connection between the soul and community, Grant's commentary on the plight of black men in the South extends to Reverend Ambrose, illuminating his struggle against passivity and devotion to his community. Grant feels that black men are damned to a life of struggle and are unable to promote lasting change:

We stay here in the South and are broken, or we run away and leave [the women] alone to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious cycle—which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and maybe even tries to change it, it is too heavy a burden because all of the others who have run away and left their burdens behind. (167)

While Grant views himself as part of this tradition of passivity, it is important to note that the struggle facing black men also applies to Reverend Ambrose. Without a family of his own, the preacher could have been justified in his decision to leave the South and its racial tensions; however, devotion to his congregation and community binds him to the Louisiana parish.

Reverend Ambrose's feelings of love for—and responsibility to—his community mirror John Paul II's definition of responsibility. Pope John Paul II argues that responsibility for another person is not designed to cause pain but is instead “an enrichment and broadening of the human being” (*Love and Responsibility* 130). Catholic personalism explains that Reverend Ambrose's communal concerns, though tied to his inability to change the injustice plaguing the South, makes him more human. In spite of his impotence, the preacher values his community and seeks to provide them with support, identifying with their human struggles. Like many of the black men in his community, Reverend Ambrose is himself unable to change “the vicious cycle” (167) of male brokenness or abandonment. He identifies with other men through his powerlessness, and Grant's commentary on black manhood reflects a communal impotence. Since men in the Gainesian community struggle against passivity, Reverend Ambrose should not be the only one demonized for his inability to change social conditions. Despite this bleak view of change, the preacher attempts to support his community and provide a source of comfort and spiritual guidance. His actions reflect his duties as a minister and leader of a church (180) as he prioritizes the soul over larger social problems, which makes him more human and allows him to identify with the struggles of the black men in the community.

Stemming from this sense of duty to his community, Reverend Ambrose feels responsible for guarding Jefferson against sin, which emphasizes his focus on the communal good. The minister takes personal offense to Grant's decision to give Jefferson a radio, claiming that Jefferson spends all his time listening to the “sin box” (181) and not eating with his godmother. Before Reverend Ambrose mentions the spiritual implications of Jefferson's radio, he views the radio as a hindrance to the community experienced among the young man, Miss Emma, and Tante Lou. The radio distracts Jefferson and temporarily prevents him from eating with his

godmother and Reverend Ambrose, limiting his chances of personal connection.

Furthering his view of the radio as a distraction, Reverend Ambrose claims that Jefferson's new possession inhibits him from praying and seeking salvation, which mirrors his focus on the spiritual instead of the physical. Through repeatedly connecting the radio to sin, the preacher presents himself as being disconnected with reality, which emphasizes his ineptitude. Despite Ambrose's protestations, the radio itself is not inherently bad; in fact, it provides Jefferson with a needed distraction from constantly thinking about the harsh reality of his death sentence. Because Jefferson clearly enjoys listening to the radio, Reverend Ambrose's aversion to it seems unfeeling, as if he is willing to deprive the young prisoner of his only source of enjoyment. Nash asserts that Jefferson's preoccupation with the radio is problematic because he listens to the blues—a secular form of music—instead of being open to spiritual instruction (350). While the preacher emphasizes the importance of community before moralizing, his behavior suggests that he is—at least temporarily—more devoted to his duty to warn against sin than he is to Jefferson's comfort. This misplaced focus highlights his impotence and contrasts with the personalist emphasis on the communal good.

Stemming from his departure from Grant's estimation of social action, Reverend Ambrose struggles to reconcile his devotion to his community with the desire for power, simultaneously humanizing him and revealing the flaws in his practical application of personalist theology. Retreating to the Rainbow Club after another emotionally draining visit with Jefferson, Grant recalls the events of the visit and vows not to tell Vivian about Reverend Ambrose's envy: "Sure, he was happy to see that Sister Emma was happy, but it was not he who had made her so, and he did not like that. Sin (or the sinner) had done this, not he" (196). Even though Grant admits to the preacher's role in securing Miss Emma's happiness, he emphasizes Ambrose's

envy and desire for power. Nash oversimplifies this power struggle, arguing that the minister is willing to “share power and to loosen his rigid sense of propriety in the service of a greater good” (347). This assessment is apt in emphasizing the communal good, yet Nash’s overwhelmingly positive treatment of Reverend Ambrose minimizes his humanity. Though a minister who has a duty to serve his community, he is not exempt from the selfishness characteristic of human nature. Reverend Ambrose reveals this self-focus through longing for both power and superiority, which Grant’s language reflects as he sets up the dichotomy of the preacher and “the sinner” (196). Designating Grant as “the sinner” (196), however, is only partly true according to Christian doctrine, which holds that all humanity—including preachers—is born into sin. In his essay on “Thomistic Personalism,” Pope John Paul II theorizes on the place of morality in personalist theology, arguing that morality supersedes the relationship between an individual and his community. As a result, the primary task of morality is to “create a system of relations between the individual and society that results in the fullest possible correlation between the person’s true good and the common good” (174). Reverend Ambrose’s desire for control contrasts with Catholic personalism’s view of morality as he seeks personal power over the communal good, over Miss Emma’s happiness and Jefferson’s realization of his humanity. The preacher’s self-interest mirrors Christian teaching that people are naturally selfish and depraved; however, his struggle against human nature adds dimension to his character and reveals the paradoxes in his personalism.

Reverend Ambrose’s humanness and paradoxical personalism culminate in his speech on lying and the common good, as the preacher emphasizes his duty to the community his own comfort. He admits to lying about his trouble to ease the trouble of others in his community, telling Grant that “[w]hen you tell yourself you feeling good when you sick, you lying. When

you tell other people you feeling well when you feeling sick, you lying. You tell them that ‘cause they have pain too, and you don’t want to add yours—and you lie” (218). Reverend Ambrose uses African-American syntax, like the omission of verbs, to more closely identify *himself* with the act of lying. On one level, his decision to lie to the community reflects an inauthenticity that could potentially isolate him from the whole. By failing to reveal his sorrows, Reverend Ambrose presents a false view of reality and implies that his own life is free from the struggles that affect the community. However, no one—not even a preacher—is immune to suffering, and his failure to identify with the suffering of the whole could result in his isolation. To present a fair, complete view of Reverend Ambrose’s dishonesty, we must understand the underlying reasons for lying: his desire not to add to the collective burden of his community (196), which reflects the personalist emphasis on community.

Throughout the novel, Reverend Ambrose experiences the tension between his definition of social action and the community’s, yet he finally embraces his humanity and Catholic personalism’s emphasis on community in the moments before Jefferson’s execution. Describing the night before Jefferson dies, Grant emphasizes the preacher’s weakness and need for human and Divine help. While Reverend Ambrose consistently exhorts others to pray, he acknowledges his dependence on God and his inability to face Jefferson’s execution without His help (237). This plea for strength humanizes Ambrose and highlights the limitations of his ability to withstand sorrow and injustice. He reverses his earlier justification of lying by vocalizing his need for God, admitting that the injustice surrounding Jefferson’s death sentence affects him on a deep, personal level. Confessing his limitations through prayer prompts Reverend Ambrose to acknowledge *his* need for support from the community. He acts relieved that Harry Williams—a man who has not appeared in the novel until now—will be present at Jefferson’s execution. In

fact, Ambrose even uses physical space to indicate his need for communal support, planning to “stand or sit as close to Harry as he could” (238). In his moment of trouble, Reverend Ambrose desires an intimate relationship with both his God and his community, allowing him to fully assert his humanity. Although the tension between faith and social action is not fully reconciled by the novel’s end, the final image of Reverend Ambrose ultimately illuminates the connection between the Divine and human communities.

Chapter 3: “What’s he done?”: The Tension Between Phillip Martin’s Faith, Activism, and  
Impotence in *In My Father’s House*

While Reverend Ambrose is unable to bring about social change, Phillip Martin seeks to reconcile his faith with action—an aim consistent with personalism—through his involvement in the community. A prominent member of St. Adrienne, Louisiana, Martin follows in the tradition of many Civil Rights-era pastors<sup>35</sup> and doubles as a clergyman and political leader. His profession of faith is inseparable from action, and he claims that his faith in God provides him with the strength to act.<sup>36</sup> Being at once a preacher and an activist<sup>37</sup>, Martin earns the admiration of those in his church and champions the rights of underpaid, ill-treated black workers. He utilizes this position of influence to organize a protest against Albert Chenal, a Cajun storeowner who fails to provide decent wages for his black employees, which suggests his desire to alleviate the injustice facing his community. Because of his involvement in his church and politics, Phillip Martin appears to uphold the personalist ideals of community, perhaps proving that institutional Christianity can coexist with social change.

However, there seems to be a shift between *A Lesson Before Dying* and *In My Father’s House* as Reverend Martin departs from the personalist belief in the communal good and reveals his ineptitude. Though it is Gaines’s most recent novel, *A Lesson Before Dying* reflects the tension between impotence and communal activity in the pre-Civil Rights South. In this novel, Reverend Ambrose shows his ineptitude by failing to achieve lasting change, yet he remains

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<sup>35</sup> Critic Daniel White points out that several secondary characters in the novel explicitly connect Phillip Martin to Dr. King. Because of Dr. King’s personalist leanings, this comparison justifies examining the extent to which Phillip Martin embodies the personalist value of community (162).

<sup>36</sup> In his first conversation with Etienne, which will be explored later in this chapter, Phillip emphasizes the connection between God’s strength and action and tells his son, “‘I was too weak then to do anything. Today I have strength. ‘Cause today I have God’” (100).

<sup>37</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “activism” as “the policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity . . . to bring about political or social change” (Def. 3b).

dedicated to his community. Because the action of *In My Father's House* occurs at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, we expect Phillip Martin to not only demonstrate this same devotion to his community, but also to act to promote justice for the black community. While Martin is more politically involved than Gaines's other preachers, he shows his impotence in the home as he fails to acknowledge his bastard son, Etienne. The preacher has the veneer of a thriving, active faith but falters when that faith must be applied to his personal life, to both the public and the private spheres. This struggle ultimately humanizes<sup>38</sup> Martin as his gradual movement away from the personalist value of community and his failure to uphold personalism's emphasis on the inherent worth of the individual highlights the difficulties in reconciling a private faith with a public life.

Gaines's commentary on *In My Father's House* expresses many of the same tensions that Phillip Martin experiences in merging his religious beliefs with his personal demons. In an interview with Mary Ellen Doyle, Gaines admits that he spent seven years laboring over this novel that he felt compelled to write (*Conversations With Ernest Gaines* 162). This compulsion could stem from the seriousness of the novel's central theme: the separation of fathers from their sons. He traces this estrangement back to the days of slavery, arguing that black men have faced the challenge of reconciling with their sons ever since. Although Gaines posits that the distance between fathers and their sons is a pervasive problem in the black community, he claims that neither political equality nor institutional Christianity have done much to solve this problem (*Conversations With Ernest Gaines* 87). Preacher-protagonist Phillip Martin experiences this tension as he believes that his identity as a Christian will atone for his past moral failings, like the abandonment of his first family. Throughout the novel, Reverend Martin struggles to

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<sup>38</sup> By *humanize*, I mean that the preacher's failures reflect that he has flaws in spite of his profession and position in the Church.

reconcile his professed faith with the consequences of past sins—a struggle that ultimately results in the permanent separation of father and son.

Before examining these tensions in the preacher's character and his movement away from the central tenets of personalism,<sup>39</sup> it is important to note that the novel does not begin by describing Phillip Martin and praising his activity in the community; instead, the opening chapter centers on Etienne's<sup>40</sup> arrival in St. Adrienne and his interactions with members of the community. The narrator comments on the newcomer's appearance, wondering if he had been recently imprisoned, because "[h]e definitely looked like somebody who had been shut in" (4). This commentary on Etienne's external appearance bears more significance than merely describing his rough, disheveled state. Through likening Martin's son to a prisoner, the narrator calls attention to his status as an outsider in the community. The language of this passage mirrors Etienne's isolation, and the narrator's assertion that he "looked like somebody who had been shut in" (4) shows the extent of his isolation. Though Etienne's prison is not a literal one, his initial isolation from any community functions as a prison, barring him from connecting to either his father or the people he meets in St. Adrienne. Etienne's emotional confinement contrasts with much of Gaines's fiction, which resists the idea of isolation and upholds the personalist value of community, and his alienation provides the impetus for Phillip Martin's actions as a pastor and a father throughout the novel.

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<sup>39</sup> In "Afrikan American Contributions to Personalism," Rufus Burrow, Jr. comments on the appeal of personalism to the black community, asserting "[t]hat personalism provides an individuo-social conception of reality and that it gives primacy to the person" (148). These are the central tenets that Reverend Martin gradually departs from throughout the course of the novel.

<sup>40</sup> We do not actually learn the proper name of Reverend Martin's son until the end of the novel. Although his name is Etienne, he calls himself "Robert X," and this act of naming reinforces both his power of self-determination and his lack of an identity derived from his family. Instead, the name Etienne gives himself is reminiscent of names of those involved in the Black Power Movement, and his constructed, individual identity is subsumed in a larger group marked by violence.

The initial characterization of Reverend Martin, provided by boardinghouse keeper and church member Virginia Colar, emphasizes his action in the community—a primary tenet of personalism. After Etienne asks her about the churches in the parish, she triumphantly tells him about “Solid Rock Baptist Church,” which is under the leadership of “Reverend Phillip J. Martin, pastor. Maybe you done heard of Reverend Martin up there in Chicago?” (9). In speaking about her pastor, Colar uses his full name and two ministerial titles, which emphasizes the man’s stature and nobility. Referring to Martin as both “reverend” and “pastor” suggests that his identity as a Christian is inseparable from his identity as a man, and this identity carries over into his leadership in St. Adrienne’s civil rights organization. These initial descriptions of Gaines’s protagonist mirror the image of the respected, active preacher of the Civil Rights Movement, most notably Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A student under the second generation of personalist thinkers at Boston University, Dr. King embraced personalism and its “ethical implications” (Farrell 83). Because personalism upholds the inherent value of human beings and the importance of community, Dr. King advocated that all people—including the marginalized black community—should be treated in a way that affirms human dignity (Farrell 83). This type of personalism, then, requires action, and Virginia Colar’s positive portrayal of her pastor reflects his efforts to embody personalist values. Consistent with her high view of Reverend Martin, Colar earnestly asks Robert if he knows about the preacher, and she believes that the man’s influence can extend from the quarters of St. Adrienne to the streets of Chicago. This question underscores Colar’s respect and value for her pastor’s communal involvement—an attitude that seems to resonate with most of the members of St. Adrienne’s black community. People like Virginia Colar ultimately revere Reverend Martin because of his efforts to merge his faith with

his service to the community of St. Adrienne.<sup>41</sup> Based on the emphasis on Martin's role as a preacher and a civil rights leader, this initial description positions the protagonist as the ideal personalist, one who unites an abstract faith with the world's tangible problems.

Despite Reverend Martin's embodiment of the tenets of personalism, Colar seems to privilege his social involvement over his character, emphasizing his action over his identity throughout her conversation with Etienne. During her explanation of the people's hope for Reverend Martin to run for Congress, Robert states that Martin "must be a good man," and she replies, "The people here think so . . . 'Course you have some 'gainst him—white and black. You go'n find that no matter where you go. But most of the people all for him. He'll be a good man in Washington. Sure done some wonderful things here for us" (10). In her assessment of Reverend Martin's character, his goodness is explicitly linked to the community as she answers Robert's question by pointing to "the people['s]" (10) view of their pastor. For Virginia Colar and many of the citizens of St. Adrienne, Martin's social activity reflects the quality of his character. The boardinghouse keeper extends this comparison between the preacher's action and character and determines that Reverend Martin will "be a good man" (10) in Congress, but her definition of goodness connotes the preacher's effectiveness as a leader, not his inherent moral qualities. Colar's assessment of his character ultimately blurs the distinction between the man's implicit identity and external action.

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<sup>41</sup> In "Cultural Confusion, Africanity, and the Black Baptist Preacher in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *In My Father's House*, critic Deborah Plant argues that African-American literature centers on the writer's sense of doubleness as they seek to merge their African worldviews with Western philosophies. She asserts that traditional African religions and philosophies are predicated on the union of the sacred and the secular while the Western view ". . . fractures all creation into irreconcilable and, therefore, potentially destructive, binary opposites" (10). Gaines's novel reflects his tension between African and American worldviews as Reverend Martin upholds the dichotomy of the sacred and the secular, or his faith and his humanity.

In contrast to this high view of Reverend Martin that overlooks his humanness, Etienne questions the pastor's activity and challenges Colar's positive perceptions of his work, which humanizes him and provides a more complete view of Martin the man. Responding to the woman's reverence for her pastor, Etienne poses a simple question: "What's he done?" (10). Through asking this pointed question, Reverend Martin's illegitimate son undercuts the people's elevated view of his father. From the opening chapters of the novel, we see that the preacher maintains an outward appearance of activity and social involvement revered by the people, yet Etienne's question suggests that even a revered public figure can be passive and inept. Instead of accepting Colar's positive characterization of Reverend Martin, Etienne subtly charges the pastor with impotence and inactivity, which humanizes him. Herman Beavers asserts the importance of the son's "presence" in these chapters, claiming that "[t]he younger man's mysterious presence is ghost-like, a projection of an irreconcilable past" (87). Taken together, the competing voices of Virginia Colar and Etienne in the opening chapter highlight the complexities of Phillip Martin's character, including his present victories and past sins. The preacher of *In My Father's House* is not simply a model civil rights leader—a model Christian man—but he is also not merely passive or impotent. By opening the novel with these dual perceptions of the protagonist's character, Gaines's narrator exposes Reverend Martin's humanness and shows the disconnect between his activity in the community and his individual struggles—a tension that drives his character throughout the novel.

The omniscient narrator's initial portrayal of Reverend Martin emphasizes the tension between his physical and spiritual selves, which provides a more complete picture of the preacher's humanness. Before Reverend Martin addresses the crowd gathered in his home, the

narrator describes his physical appearance, calling attention to the women's response to their pastor:

Phillip was a very handsome, dark-brown-skinned man, admired by women, black and white. The black women spoke openly of their admiration for him, the white women said it around people they could trust. There were rumors that he was involved with women other than his wife, but whether these rumors were true or not he was very much respected by most of the people who knew him. And no one ever questioned his position as leader of the civil rights movement in the parish. (34-35)

By centering this description on Reverend Martin's physical person, the narrator reminds us of the preacher's humanness, which adds another layer of complexity to the man revered as a spiritual and political leader. In her discussion of the spiritual and the secular, Plant argues that spirituality, according to an African view, dictates the actions of the "physical sel[f]." She holds that a Western, or nominally Christian, conception of morality relies on the denial of physicality, which denies part of a person's humanness (10-11). The definition of a person<sup>42</sup> encapsulates both spiritual and physical realities, and Reverend Martin's personhood reflects a tension between his spiritual life and his physical one. This depiction of his physicality brings our attention to the personhood behind the man who occupies positions of leadership in both the spiritual and political realms. Essentially, the omniscient narrator describes Phillip as a real man with real, human complexities.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of his humanity is the community's response to Reverend Martin's expressions of sexuality—an aspect of his personhood that simultaneously

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<sup>42</sup> John Paul II's definition of personhood in *Love and Responsibility* sheds some light on the union of the sacred and the spiritual. He argues that a person can relate to the "external world" due to the existence of "its inwardness, its interior life" (23).

humanizes him and suggests his gradual departure from a personalist ethic. In these descriptions of his physical person, the narrator suggests that the people of St. Adrienne care little about “whether these rumors” (35) of marital infidelity are true. Because Martin is highly respected for his work in the public realm, his private behavior does little to diminish this level of respect. Despite these suspected acts of unfaithfulness to his wife, Alma, the community still views him as an authority figure and seems to disregard the acts he has allegedly committed against her person. For those gathered at Martin’s home, his social action seems to atone for his past indiscretions and expressions of sexuality, which simultaneously emphasizes the personalist value for social action and Martin’s actions at expense of the inherent dignity of persons.

In addition to his marital indiscretions, Reverend Martin also illustrates the tension between his warring physical and spiritual selves through commenting on an older woman’s physical form and failing to uphold the personalist belief in inherent human dignity. When the preacher surveys the crowd, he notices an elderly, female member of his church and states, “And there’s Sister Claiborne standing over there with her fine foxy self—you seen any changes, Sister Claiborne?” (38). Here, Reverend Martin’s words underscore the contrast between faith and sexual objectification. Referring to the elderly woman as “Sister” (38), he calls attention to their common faith that functions as a determinant of their identity, yet his mention of her “fine foxy self” (38) functions as a pronouncement on her identity, too, as he highlights her physical appearance. However, the description of Sister Claiborne as a “small gray-haired woman dressed entirely in black” (38) undercuts Reverend Martin’s comments about her sexuality by emphasizing her age. The community’s lack of response to Reverend Martin’s rumored infidelities, as well as his remarks to the elderly woman, is antithetical to Pope John Paul II’s vision of a personalist ethic and distinction between the verbs “to love” and “to use.” It

is, then, the responsibility of a person to “trea[t]” a person “as an object of love, not as an object for use” (*Love and Responsibility* 42). In this scene at the party, Reverend Martin undermines both Alma and Sister Claiborne’s personhood through either infidelity or objectification. By merging the seemingly disparate worlds of faith and sexuality, this scene highlights the complexities of Phillip Martin the man.

Consequently, he is not merely a preacher or merely a man, and he must face the challenge of learning how to reconcile his private faith with his public life—a public life marked by action. The speech that Reverend Martin gives at the party mirrors this need to reconcile his faith with social action and follows in the tradition of African-American personalism, upholding the value of community and understanding the need for action. Since the action of *In My Father’s House* occurs at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin’s speech illuminates the conflicting ideologies of nonviolent resistance and direct—even violent—action. Contrasting with those who “screa[m] Black Power,” the preacher asserts that “[l]ove is the only thing. Understanding the only thing. Persistence, the only thing. Keep on pushing, the only thing” (37). His words encapsulate the goals of nonviolent resistance, a philosophy of social action advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., perhaps one of the most well-known African-American personalists. Rufus Burrow, Jr. centers his *God and Human Dignity* on an examination of Dr. King’s personalism, claiming that this giant of the Civil Rights Movement believed in “a Creator God who is personal and loving, who demands that righteousness and justice be done, and that compassion be exhibited toward the least fortunate” (70). Stemming from Dr. King’s belief in a God who cares about the plights of the oppressed, justice and righteousness are communal concerns. To men like Dr. King and Reverend Martin, nonviolent resistance provides a means of attaining that justice while still upholding the personhood of the entire human community—even

their oppressors. Martin's assertion that "[l]ove is the only thing" (37) reflects the personalist belief in a person's inherent worth, and pursuing this course of action simultaneously reinforces black dignity and upholds the worth of men who oppress the black community, like storeowner Albert Chenal. For Martin, this type of love constitutes action—a claim that is antithetical to more militant groups like Black Power advocates. By privileging love and mutual cooperation, the preacher and community activist seeks to forge a middle way between the violence of the Black Power Movement and the passivity of those in the bars claiming that "[n]othing will ever change" (37). It is important to note that Reverend Martin's personalism does not just uphold the dignity of human persons by resisting violence; instead, his vision of nonviolent resistance couples an underlying value for human life with social action. The marriage of personhood and action is one of the central tenets of personalism, and the preacher-protagonist seeks to reconcile this belief with the need for social action.

The opening section of the novel primarily centers on Reverend Martin's activity in his community and his role as a leader in his church and in the civil rights organization, yet there is a noticeable shift from the communal to the individual. While the preacher's initial characterization seems to revere him for his social action, the remainder of the novel centers on his impotence as an individual. The encounter between Reverend Martin and Etienne sheds light on his movement away from the personalism as he fails to recognize the personhood and inherent value of the son he abandoned twenty years ago.

Although Martin publicly endorses the personalist values of community and social action, he fails to appropriate this action to his private life, and his first encounter with his son mirrors this movement away from these personalist ideals. After giving his speech, the preacher sees Etienne in his home, and this recognition causes him to collapse. As fellow church members

surround Reverend Martin, he watches his son leave the room and tells the men, “I’m all right. Please let me get up. I have to get up. Don’t let me deny him again” (41). Because the act of standing is a recurring theme in much of Gaines’s fiction, the preacher’s fall is especially significant. In the scene preceding his fall, Phillip’s speech situates him in a place of dominance as he asserts his vision for social action and nonviolent resistance, and his character seems to reflect that Christianity can be compatible with social change and progress. However, the act of recognizing his son exposes the private life behind his veneer of an active, public Christianity. Though he seeks justice for the black community of St. Adrienne, Reverend Martin confronts the reality of his past injustices toward his son, and his fall serves as an external symbol of his impotence. In addition to his overt show of impotence, he tells the men not to “let [him] deny [his son] again” (41), which further underscores his impotence. Martin’s command reflects two levels of his passivity and impotence as he admits to denying Etienne and seemingly blames the men for this second denial. As the pastor tries to get up, the narrator mentions Octave Bacheron’s, one of the men in attendance, “small white hand on his chest” (41) that initially prevents him from moving. Martin reveals his impotence by shifting blame for his past passivity from himself to the white man keeping him on the floor.<sup>43</sup> Though their physical positions reflect the history of white oppression, Reverend Martin’s impotence extends beyond racial—or communal—concerns. Instead, his impotence centers on the denial of his son’s personhood and his failure to act like a father. Martin’s dual failures—acknowledging the personhood of his son and taking the appropriate action—reflect a movement away from personalism in his private life.

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<sup>43</sup> Plant asserts that Phillip Martin can rightfully blame his inaction on Octave Bacheron’s attempt to physically restrain him (15). However, her argument oversimplifies his struggle with passivity and seems to provide an excuse for his inaction instead of emphasizing his responsibility as both a leader and a father.

While this fall signifies his shortcomings as a father and as an embodiment of personalism, Reverend Martin's admission of guilt humanizes him because he begins to realize the seriousness of abandoning his first family. Even though he implicates the men at the party with his second denial of Etienne, the pastor's use of the word "again" (41) in his command reveals his knowledge of his abandonment. This recognition prompts Reverend Martin to assume responsibility for his past failures, and even his attempts at evading responsibility are fundamentally human reactions. Despite his position as a preacher, he is not immune from the tendency to evade responsibility and blame external circumstances (or people like Octave Bacheron) for his inaction. Reverend Martin's simultaneous admission of guilt and excuse for passivity reveals the paradoxical nature of his character, but these contradictions serve to highlight his humanity as neither his occupation nor his social stature protect him from these real, human problems.

Though a highly respected pastor, Martin faces spiritual struggles, and the reality of his second denial of Etienne causes him to be spiritually impotent, which humanizes him and shows his paradoxical value for community. He retreats to his office in search of relief, and the narrator's observations of his attempts to pray emphasize the conflicted nature of his character: "Phillip turned from the window to his desk. He wanted to pray, he needed to pray, but how could he pray? If he prayed out loud, Elijah would surely hear him; and he could not get satisfaction praying in silence" (54). As the narrator describes Reverend Martin's attempt to pray, the anaphoric construction builds in intensity, moving from his desire to pray to his need for Divine intervention, showing his desperation. However, this realization of his need for prayer contrasts with his inability to physically vocalize these invocations. His fear that Elijah, a fellow church member who lives with Martin's family, will hear his prayers highlights his humanness

as he fears for his reputation in the community. Vocalizing his most personal needs carries the risk of Elijah finding out about his preacher's past moral failures, and this revelation could damage his reputation as a champion for justice when he acts unjustly toward his first family. Critic Karla F.C. Holloway notes the relationship between the preacher's spiritual impotence and his role in the community, arguing that his inability to pray signifies his removal from the community (183). His fear of being heard underscores the widening distance between Reverend Martin and his people, yet these concerns show the value he places on community, revealing the complexities of his gradual departure from personalism.

Reverend Martin even exhibits a similar focus on community in his attempt to connect with the Divine, underscoring the disconnect between his private and public lives and revealing his humanity. His reading of Scripture ironically leads him to reflect on his relationship with the men in his church and civil rights organization, not the failed relationship with his biological son. While in his study, Reverend Martin “[b]egan reading, moving his lips as he read: ‘Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. . .’” (54). The preacher’s actions contrast with the picture of an active, welcoming Jesus shown in this passage from John 14. Jesus’ words center on action as He gives an imperative command calling the disciples to believe, yet He also acts and promises to “prepare a place” (54) for His followers. This emphasis on Christ’s activity and care contrasts with Reverend Martin’s struggle with passivity, but the preacher instead focuses on his need for community support.<sup>44</sup> As thoughts of

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<sup>44</sup> Tuire Valkeakari, author of “Doubting and Questioning: Male Preachers in Ernest Gaines’s *In My Father’s House*, Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*, and John Edgar Wideman’s *The Cattle Killing*,” views the party scene as a subversion of the John 14 narrative. While the biblical account focuses on Christ welcoming His followers into paradise, Phillip’s fall precedes Etienne’s retreat from his father’s house, and this act of denying his son again is antithetical to Christ’s promise to welcome His followers (137).

the community's acceptance interrupt his reading of Scripture, Martin wonders, "Who could he go to? Who would believe him?" (54). Because he is the only one in St. Adrienne who knows about Etienne's existence, his questions reflect his sense of isolation and desire for communal support to combat this secret shame. Though Reverend Martin's questions express the fundamental need for human connection, his communal emphasis also detracts focus from the crux of his problem: the confrontation with his past moral failure and the responsibility to reconcile with his son. In this instance, the preacher reflects the personalist value for community while denying the tenet affirming the necessity of action based on the inherent dignity of the human person. This paradox is central to Phillip Martin's character as he gradually moves away from embodying personalism in his roles as both a pastor and a father.

Drawing from these inconsistencies between his faith and actions, Reverend Martin encapsulates the tension between reconciling his public responsibility as a civil rights activist with his private faith, espousing the view that his identity is tied to his action. Because he is spiritually impotent and unable to connect to the Divine through prayer or reading Scripture, he elevates his responsibility as a leader over his connection to God and wants to atone for failing to get up after his fall. Reverend Martin muses on the men's justification of his fall:

Tired? He, Phillip Martin tired? He could have picked up both Octave Bacheron and Anthony McVay at the same time. He could have pushed that piano across the room with both of them sitting on top of it. Tired? Tired? . . . Why did he lie there and let them say that? Why did he let them do this to himself, to his people? . . . Being a leader, wasn't that the thing to do? If not the leader, who then? Who? But no, like some cowardly frightened little nigger, he lay there and let them do all the talking for him. (54-55)

Through posing rhetorical questions about his weariness, Reverend Martin attaches a level of shame to being perceived as weak and passive. He balks at the assumption that he is tired, capitalizing on the men's perception of his physical weakness—not his hidden passivity toward his son (54). Instead, Reverend Martin seeks to assert his identity as a man through physical strength, which ironically perpetuates the view that his identity is inherently linked to his action (or lack thereof). Reverend Martin's emphasis on his physical ability is especially significant since the men who he claims to be able to pick up are both white, which highlights his power as a black man to assert his masculinity and personhood over white men who seek to keep the black man under the weight of oppression. As Reverend Martin grows more frustrated, the desire to assert his masculinity grows more absurd. The image of the aging preacher pushing two white men on a piano shows that his desire for masculine expression trumps his rationality here as he seeks to prove his identity through whatever means possible.

Coupled with this heavy emphasis on action and strength is his rumination on leadership, revealing what the preacher believes to be the source of his identity and demonstrating his impotence as an embodiment of personalism. The question “[i]f not the leader, who then?” (55) reveals that Reverend Martin derives his identity from his position as a leader in both his church and in St. Adrienne's civil rights association. Because he esteems his external positions of power to be determinants of his identity, the question of his masculinity threatens his identity as a leader in both arenas—the political and the spiritual. Although personalism values social action, Reverend Martin fails to recognize that an understanding of the inherent dignity and value of human beings must precede social action. Capitalizing on the irony of the preacher's actions, Valkeakari argues that the novel itself centers on the “religious hypocrisy” of a protagonist who “has built his present success on a stubborn denial of responsibility for his past actions [and] . . .

violates, on a daily basis, the very ethics of integrity that he is expected to embody” (133). This misplaced view of his identity, while it contradicts the central tenets of personalism, shows the preacher’s humanity as he seeks to define himself by his external strength—not his implicit identity as a human being.

Reverend Martin’s account of his conversion experience further illuminates his perception of his strength and identity and shows the complexities in his task of reconciling his duty to his son with his initial conversion, which highlights his humanness. Talking with Elijah about his fall at the party, he links the act of falling to his conversion experience, and “Phillip thought back to that moment of his conversion fifteen years ago, and nodded, thoughtfully, to himself. ‘The only other time I fell in my life. . . Shot at; shot. Staggered, but wouldn’t go down’” (57). In the context of this conversation, Phillip compares his salvation experience and the results of seeing his son again. As his initial conversion restores his relationship with God, seeing Etienne presents another opportunity for restoration and requires him to appropriate his professed faith to his interaction with his son. While this meeting provides Reverend Martin with a chance to act like a father and acknowledge his son’s personhood, Etienne’s appearance carries with it the chance that the preacher will deny him again. These dual conversion experiences, as Beavers claims, underscore the novel’s theme of the past’s role in spiritual redemption (86). Both falls—and conversion experiences—should result in tangible changes, yet the preacher-protagonist continues to ignore his past sin of abandoning his family. As a result, Reverend Martin’s actions seem to contradict the expected effects of his spiritual conversion, as his restored relationship with God should incite him to actively pursue reconciliation in his private, family life. In “The Experience of Conversion,” David O’Rourke states that conversion experiences often “allo[w] us to resolve immobilizing crisis in a mobilizing way and deal with potentially destructive forces in

a creative way” (8). For O’Rourke, conversion experiences naturally result in action. There seems to be a disconnect between Reverend Martin’s faith and action, yet this discrepancy reveals his humanity by exposing the inherent difficulties in living a wholly consistent life. Though the preacher-protagonist seems inept, his struggle is fundamentally human and reflects the complexities of applying an abstract faith to concrete circumstances.

Since Reverend Martin’s account of his conversion humanizes him by depicting the paradoxical nature of his character, his connection between falling and weakness carries significant implications for his spiritual conversion, further signifying his movement away from the personalist value of community and reflecting an intensified focus on himself. He links his physical posture and ability to stand to his view of himself as a man, and standing serves as a physical representation of his strength. For the preacher, recalling the memory of being shot underscores his adherence to traditional conceptions of masculinity, and he equates his ability to withstand injury and oppression without falling with his value as a man. If Martin likens falling with being emasculated, then this perception logically extends to his spiritual conversion, begging the question of whether Christianity can be reconciled with action. Followed to its logical conclusion, Reverend Martin’s indictment of his own weakness implies that his faith also reflects a level of weakness and inaction. His assertion that he “was a good man” (57), interestingly enough, occurs after he denies his son for the first time and leaves Etienne, and his mother, Johanna. Reverend Martin’s assessment of himself seems inconsistent with his earlier comparison of masculinity with action, yet this elevated view reflects his humanity as he wants to believe himself to be better than he truly is.

Despite the preacher’s positive view of himself, his impotence toward his son reflects his lack of understanding of divine forgiveness as he expresses his humanness through the desire for

freedom; consequently, this impotence allows him the opportunity to reconcile his past and present. Instead of praying the Lord's Prayer, Reverend Martin asks why God allowed Etienne to find him, wondering if his son's appearance is an act of divine punishment. His tone grows more adamant as he invokes God, saying, "But I asked forgiveness for my past. And You've forgiven me for my past" (68). Here, Martin equates Divine forgiveness with the freedom from consequences. In reality, however, the two are not interchangeable. While recognizing his need for forgiveness and seeking it restores his relationship with God, he bears the responsibility of seeking reconciliation with his son.<sup>45</sup> Reverend Martin's inability to understand his role in promoting reconciliation reflects the human desire to escape consequences and blame for past actions. Though he has a skewed view of divine forgiveness and personal responsibility, his spiritual impotence allows him to see the gulf between himself and his son—a gulf that can only be closed by embodying personalism's affirmation of individual dignity and worth. After confronting his son and his past, Reverend Martin—who has been the picture of personalist social action—shifts his focus from the communal to the individual and seeks to reconcile his faith with his responsibility as a father.

Gaines also comments on the theological implications of Reverend Martin's separation from his son, revealing the tension between the preacher's warring selves: the man before and after his conversion. He highlights Martin's complexity in establishing a distinction between his past actions and present identity, explaining that the preacher let his abandonment of his old family remain in the past even after his conversion. However, Gaines argues that the pastor's conversion cannot atone for his past:

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<sup>45</sup> Holloway supports this assertion in her claim that Reverend Martin does not experience a divine sense of peace or healing since he is initially blind to his responsibility to reconcile himself to Etienne (184).

When he [Martin] realized his responsibility, he tried to make it up by becoming the “new man” with a new family, and still forgot the old. When the past catches up, he goes to God for an answer but finds it can’t be fixed in a few days. There is an old Negro saying, “God isn’t always there when you call him, but he’s always on time.” But this Christian belief is shaken, cracked. God helped the minister to help other people, but when he needed God to bring himself and his son together, God failed. (*Conversations With Ernest Gaines* 163)

In this weighty indictment, Gaines highlights the inescapability of the past and the futility of a self-made redemption. Although Phillip Martin claims to be changed by God, his pre-conversion self is still part of his human experience. In other words, his salvation experience does not erase the consequences of his past sins, yet Gaines implicates God for His seeming failure to intervene and reconcile Reverend Martin with his son. Much of the conflict in this novel centers on the tension between the preacher’s faith and his humanness, and he struggles to unite his past and present identities on the public stage of the Civil Rights Movement.

As Reverend Martin departs from his personalist allegiance to his community, his first conversation with Etienne reveals his ineptitude through his failure to understand the impact of his passivity on his son, which shows the discrepancy between his professed faith and his actions. The young man expresses his vengeful motives for coming back to St. Adrienne, and Reverend Martin’s response to his son’s intentions highlights his impotence as a father:

“Revenge?” Phillip asked him. “Revenge for what?”

“For destroying me. For making me the eunuch I am. For destroying my family: my mama, my brother, my sister.”

“How did I destroy you, destroy the family?” Phillip asked him. “I ain’t seen one of y’all in twenty years—over twenty years. How did I destroy you?” (98-99)

Etienne introduces a distinction here between violence and passivity through seeking to avenge his father’s abandonment. For him, violence provides a means of asserting his personhood to an inept father, and this appeal of violence contrasts with Reverend Martin’s philosophy of community activism centered on nonviolent resistance. The pastor’s status as a leader in St. Adrienne, however, does little to affect Etienne’s view of him as a father as his son sees him as passive and inept. Yet Etienne’s emphasis on destruction in these charges against his father reveals that passivity is a type of violence. The absence of a father destroys the family unit, and Reverend Martin accomplishes this destruction by abandoning his first family and forsaking his responsibilities as a father. As a result, this inaction demonstrates the extent of Reverend Martin’s departure from the tenets of personalism. Not only does he redirect his focus from the community to his individual struggles, but he also shows his ineptitude by moving away from personalism’s standard for behavior toward fellow persons, namely his son.

During this conversation with Etienne, Reverend Martin’s profession of love toward his son ironically couples with his claims about his struggle with passivity, further signifying his movement away from personalism. Martin admits to not remembering the names of his son and his other illegitimate children, claiming, “I don’t know yours, I don’t know your brother’s, I don’t know your sisters. But you mine, and I love you. I love you now, and I love you then. I was too weak then to do anything. Today I have strength. ‘Cause today I have God” (100). Steeped in irony, this profession of love for his son contrasts with the preacher’s history of inaction. Martin’s love for Etienne is questionable when he does not even know his children’s names—the basic determinants of their identities. John Paul II’s definition of love as an “activity” (*Love and*

*Responsibility* 82) illuminates the crux of Reverend Martin's failure to fully love his son as love transcends mere feelings and is manifested in action. This connection between love and action undercuts his claims of "hav[ing] God" (100) since he fails to reconnect with his first family even after his conversion.<sup>46</sup> Etienne recognizes the deep irony in his father's occupation as a pastor and the reality of his abandonment, claiming, "Mama thought it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. You down here saving souls" (100). His criticism of Reverend Martin's character is valid and demonstrates the discrepancy between his father's faith and his private life.

Toward the end of their conversation, Etienne reveals that his sister had been raped, and this act of injustice challenges Reverend Martin's view of himself as both a pastor and a father, prompting him to realize the extent of his removal from the personalist ideal. Throughout his narration of his sister's rape, Etienne grapples with questions of justice and familial responsibility, and he berates himself for failing to kill his sister's rapist: "Instead of me taking the gun like I shoulda done, I took her in my arms and called on God. Viciously raped, her young body torn and bloody—and I sat there rocking her in my arms, crying, and calling on God" (102-3). In this heartbreaking exchange, Etienne contrasts his desire for revenge—or action—with his prayers. To the young man, calling on God signifies a type of passivity, as he is unable to do anything to change his sister's circumstances. For Etienne, though, this necessary action requires violence, and the violence's appeal challenges the nature of his definition of protection. While killing his sister's rapist would provide physical protection from future attacks, this act of violence would not atone for the man's crime. Witnessing Etienne's grief over his sister's rape, Reverend Martin begins to see the extent of the injustices his first family faces. As he confronts his family's personal suffering for perhaps the first time, he has an understandably emotional

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<sup>46</sup> Because Etienne is the one who actively seeks his father, we can deduce that Reverend Martin would have remained content with his life in St. Adrienne, continuing to ignore his children's existence.

response and is moved to action, asking Etienne how to contact Johanna, his former lover, and his other children (103). This question signifies a final shift in Martin's personalism, as his position as a pastor or former civil rights leader<sup>47</sup> is no longer his priority; instead, he refocuses his attention on his first family, recognizing that he needs to be a father—and affirm the personhood of his children—before he can effectively lead in other venues.

As Reverend Martin undergoes a quest to discover more about Johanna and his other children, he encounters another pastor—Reverend Peters—who functions as a relic of a seemingly outdated version of Christianity that does not aid in reconciliation between fathers and sons. Seated at a diner, the older preacher asks Martin if he has prayed about the circumstances that are troubling him. Phillip's response to this question shows the urgency of his desire to find, and reconcile himself to, Etienne, and he doubts that God will intervene and restore his relationship with his son. In this scene, Reverend Martin doubts the justice of a God who seems to do little to restore fathers to their sons, and he applies these doubts to the last words of men who are about to get executed. These men, he claims, rarely “called out daddy's name at that last hour. Heard mama called, heard gran'mon, nanane—Jesus, God. Not one time he heard daddy called” (153). Though indicting black fathers for their distance from their sons, this accusation prompts a telling response from Reverend Peters. The older preacher fails to mention the significance of black men's absence from their sons' lives and instead issues religious platitudes, expressing pleasure over the fact that at least the men facing execution thought to pray (153). Though Reverend Peters is well intentioned, this religious platitude does not reverse the injustice of the men's death sentences. Here, Reverend Martin believes in the insufficiency of a faith that fails to confront these injustices; however, he fails to account for his role and personal

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<sup>47</sup> Before Reverend Martin undergoes a quest to learn about Johanna and his other children, Deacon Mills and the other members of the civil rights group oust the preacher as their leader because of the shift in his focus from the communal to the individual (127-29).

responsibility for failing to actively pursue reconciliation with his son. As the disillusioned preacher expects God to act, he overlooks the injustice that he enacted on Etienne when he first abandoned him, which highlights the discrepancy between his professed faith and his tangible actions.

*In My Father's House* ends with Reverend Martin's tragic admission of feeling jilted and rejected by God and Etienne, which underscores the extent of both his impotence and humanness. Despite the preacher's initial success as a civil rights leader, he still fails, as his community involvement—though consistent with the aims of personalism—is insufficient to atone for his past moral indiscretions. The novel traces Reverend Martin's journey from an ideal leader and personalist to a man who even loses his confidence in a personal, benevolent God—the foundation of theistic personalism. Although we can demonize him for abandoning his family and failing to recognize the personhood of his son, the preacher's story ultimately reveals the importance of integrating a seemingly private faith with a public life.

## Chapter 4: The Distant, Devoted Preacher: Reverend Jameson's Paradoxical Personalism

Gaines's exploration of the tension between the Church and social action culminates in *A Gathering of Old Men*, as Reverend Jameson seems impotent and removed from personalism's emphasis on community. Though unable to incite social change, Reverend Ambrose is devoted to his community through supporting Miss Emma and preaching to Jefferson, upholding his sense of communal responsibility and remaining consistent with personalism. We see a shift between *A Lesson Before Dying* and *In My Father's House*, however, as Reverend Martin forsakes his responsibilities as civil rights leader to connect with—and atone for his abandonment of—his bastard son. This gradual departure from personalism and community appears to be fully realized in Reverend Jameson, who remains distant from the concerns of the other men. Although the action of the novel centers on community,<sup>48</sup> the preacher physically stands apart from the men and plays a virtually non-existent part in their self-actualization. Reverend Jameson's distance perpetuates the image of the inept preacher who is removed from the tangible concerns facing his community, seemingly revealing that the Church cannot be reconciled with effective social action.

While critics largely view Reverend Jameson in terms of his ineptitude, he is worthy of further examination through a personalist lens. Rooted in the reality of God's personality, personalism links the divine with the human through affirming the inherent dignity of persons and upholding the value of community—two related themes that are central in this novel. However, there seems to be a distinction between personalism and the critical view of organized religion in Gaines's fiction. Lee Papa capitalizes on the inescapability of the Church in Gaines's

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<sup>48</sup> In an interview with Mary Ellen Doyle, Gaines asserts that there is no single protagonist in *A Gathering of Old Men*; rather, “[t]he old men as a group are the protagonist. The central motif is that they had not acted manfully in the past, and here was God giving them a second chance to stand up one day” (*Conversations with Ernest Gaines* 167).

works and argues that “the Christian church exists as a system of white oppression, whereas the denial of the church and the rejuvenation of a personal and communal religion become parts of the route to freedom and the realization of self” (187). Personalism provides a corrective for this assertion, though, as it shows that the recovery of the personal and religion are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In “Personality and Christian Ethics,” Walter G. Muelder emphasizes the distinction between personalism and individualism, citing the work of Joseph Oldham, who asserts that “the personalism of Christianity” (199) and individualism are antithetical. Oldham goes on to explain that “faith means being incorporated into the body of Christ. The most personal kind of faith involves the most universal responsibility” (qtd. in Muelder 199). A *Gathering of Old Men* centers on a similar realization of selfhood and communal responsibility, and Reverend Jameson provides a unique study of the Church’s role in fostering social action. Although the community undercuts the preacher’s authority and causes him to seem impotent, his presence in the novel allows the men to come to a fuller understanding of their value as individuals and as a community, which highlights Reverend Jameson’s humanness.

The opening of this novel, while not explicitly centered on Reverend Jameson, uses a child to reflect the central problem facing the community that the preacher serves—the tension between passivity and action. After Aunt Glo tells Snookum to remain seated at her kitchen table so she can talk to Candy Marshall, the boy’s older brother, Toddy, takes pleasure in this reprimand. Snookum admits that he wants to hit his older brother but curbs his desire for violence because Toddy makes him agree to a year where he cannot reciprocate any childlike acts of aggression. The description of these threats illustrates the dichotomy between passivity and violence:

He [Toddy] told me he could grin at me all he wanted to, and he could hit me, and kick men, and pinch me (in church, or home, he didn't care), and he could steal my cake if he wanted to, or my candy if I had any, and he could lose all his marbles to me, and I better not take them back, and I better not gig his spinning top when we played giggging [.] (4)

While the content of these threats mirrors both Snookum and Toddy's childlikeness, the sentence structure of his narration highlights the extent of the younger brother's forced passivity. In spite of his brother's escalating torments, Snookum is forced to remain passive. Though a child, he serves as a microcosm of the larger black community that faces a similar struggle: remaining passive or acting violently to counteract white oppression. This dichotomy between passivity and violence extends throughout the rest of the novel, and Snookum's childlike voice carries implications for how the black community responds to oppression.

Stemming from Snookum's function as a microcosm of the black community, the young boy provides the novel's initial characterization of Reverend Jameson, and he presents the minister as a hindrance to his freedom, which carries implications of the preacher's failure to embody the central values of personalism. While Snookum is only a child, his description of the minister introduces the distinction between his desires and Reverend Jameson's—or, more broadly, the Church's—standards for his actions. At Candy Marshall's request, Snookum summons the pastor to Mathu's house and shows his derision for the religious man: "Me and Reverend Jameson didn't get along too good. He was always getting on me, saying I should be in the church serving the Lord instead of shooting marbles and playing ball" (7). Snookum's childlikeness colors his perception of Reverend Jameson, and he esteems the preacher as a hindrance to his fun. Here, Jameson's competing voice shows that his priorities are different

from those in his community, or different from those of the young boy. Although it is important to consider the connection between Snookum's age and his opinion of Reverend Jameson, his criticism is valid in the context of the novel as a whole. The men of the Marshall plantation view Reverend Jameson as an oppositional force designed to impede the progress of the black community, which suggests the preacher's movement away from the personalist values of community and social action. As a result, the community—including both Snookum and the older men—view Reverend Jameson as a nuisance who opposes their stand for freedom and self-determination, which suggests his ineptitude and failure to uphold the tenets of personalism.

While we first encounter Reverend Jameson through a child's perspective, the preacher's initial interaction with the old men simultaneously reveals his humanity and opposition to the men's definition of social action. As the men arrive at Mathu's house at Candy's request, several of those in his yard begin confessing to murdering Beau Boutan. Candy emphatically explains, "I shot him. But all of a sudden Mathu said he shot him. Then all of a sudden Rufe said he shot him. Johnny Paul was nowhere around here. But after he came here and saw what had happened, he said he had as much good reason to shoot Beau as anybody" (16). Considering these spontaneous confessions, it is significant to note that Reverend Jameson is the only man, besides Mathu, who does not confess to Beau Boutan's murder. While the men naturally rise to Mathu's defense, Reverend Jameson's silence marginalizes him, positioning him as an outsider in the community he serves. This divide between the preacher and his people, on one level, creates a sense of isolation that is antithetical to the personalist design for community. In his work linking personalism with a working system of ethics, Deats claims that we have a responsibility to "accept conflict in the course of seeking to formulate and achieve the ideals of personality and of community, and to work through conflict . . . toward consensus, justice, and reconciliation"

(281). Because of this central aim of reconciliation, the preacher has a responsibility to his community to be unified in their pursuit of social action. Although Jameson alienates himself by not falsely confessing to the murder, his silence allows the other men to begin their process of self-actualization. Here, his silence does not reflect his passivity—or more broadly, the passivity of the Church—but is instead necessary for the men to atone for their past history of inaction. While Reverend Jameson is removed from the collective decision to defend Mathu, he does not wholly fail to uphold personalism's emphasis on community; instead, his distance allows the old men to determine their individual identities to strengthen the whole.

As the rest of the men prepare to join the others at Mathu's home, Reverend Jameson is noticeably absent, yet his distance allows the men to understand the significance of meaningful action for their community, providing them with the opportunity to uphold the tenets of personalism. After Mat and Chimley receive word that the other men are flocking to Mathu's yard, they resolve to join them, simultaneously showing their support for Mathu and atoning for their past passivity. The two men exchange knowing glances, which are reflective of their tight-knit relationship, and resolve to be there in case Fix and his vigilantes come, too: "Mat still looked at me. His eyes was still saying more than he had said. We wait till now? Now, when we're old men, we get to be brave? I didn't know how to answer him. All I knowed, I had to go, if he went" (32). Chimley's questions reflect his internal frustration with his history of waiting, of waiting to take action against Fix and his men. Seeking to atone for his past inaction, Chimley sees this bravery as a means of asserting his manhood and views his identity as a process of becoming. Both he and Mat must act to show their understanding of their humanity, and it is striking that this appropriation of manhood occurs in the context of community. After declaring his intentions to go to Mathu's yard, Chimley uses a conditional statement, asserting that he "had

to go, if [Mat] went” (32). His language implies that his assertion of humanity and manhood depends upon Mat’s willingness to take action, and this sense of community provides both men with a way to define themselves through the action they resolve to take together. The link between personhood and action is a key component of Catholic personalism.<sup>49</sup> In his treatise on personalism, John Paul II argues that a person, “in his whole relationship with this world, with reality, [...] strives to assert himself, his ‘I,’ and he must act thus, since the nature of his being demands it” (*Love and Responsibility* 23). An understanding of personhood is manifested in action, and the passivity the men seek to atone for is more than an individual struggle but instead extends to the community as Mat and Chimley resolve to join the communal response against impotence. Although Reverend Jameson appears nowhere in this scene, his absence allows the men to come to a place of self-determination, which is inseparable from personalism, where they recognize their need to act. On the surface, it seems that Reverend Jameson’s absence removes him from the novel’s action, yet it permits the old men to define themselves apart from any institution (even a religious one) and atone for a life of inaction.

Reverend Jameson’s absence is especially striking in the scene where the men pray over their family gravesites, yet his distance from them requires the men to see their need for redemption from a life of inaction, which is consistent with personalism. Along the way to Mathu’s house, the men come upon makeshift graveyard where their family members are buried: “We went to our different little family plots. But we wasn’t too sure about all the graves. Most of the graves after a while had just shifted and mixed in with all the others” (46-47). The men’s inability to distinguish their family members’ graves shows that they all share a similar story of oppression and, ultimately, face the same end. These old men are linked to each other out of their

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<sup>49</sup> The clear connection between Gaines’s fiction, place, and community justifies the use of Catholic personalism as theorized by Pope John Paul II since the state of Louisiana has a heavy Catholic influence.

shared passivity, and visiting the gravesites allows them to connect to their histories, deepening the sense of community. Capitalizing on their solidarity as a community, Dirty Red assesses their purpose for visiting the graves and for coming to Mathu's aid: "to do something for all the others" (46). Through resisting isolation and emphasizing the importance of action, Dirty Red's admission reflects personalism's emphasis on community. Willis King affirms the connection between personalism and human connection, arguing that no human being can truly live in isolation, and that because of the social nature of humanity, "there must be a genuine desire to cooperate" (219). While Reverend Jameson's absence is indicative of his distance from the community, even this distance is purposeful and shows his implicit cooperation with his community, as it allows the old men to connect to both their histories and each other. Although the preacher seems to be removed from the tangible problems facing his community, his early absence illuminates the paradoxes of his embodiment of personalist ethics as he permits the men to determine their own identities outside the context of the Church.

Reverend Jameson plays a seemingly insignificant role in the opening chapters of the novel, and the men minimize his role in the community after they all gather in Mathu's yard, emphasizing the preacher's isolation from the rest of the men. Fifteen different narrators tell the story of the old men's stand, and Clatoo criticizes his preacher for being noticeably separate from the rest of the men. Clatoo notes that Jameson "was the only man there who didn't have a gun, and the only person there who looked like he hated the sight of [them]" (51). Reverend Jameson's refusal to have a gun separates him from the rest of the men in Mathu's yard as only women and children are unarmed. By not carrying a gun, Reverend Jameson refuses to take an active part in their stand and isolates himself from their central goal: to assert themselves to Fix

and his men using whatever means necessary.<sup>50</sup> Because the preacher fails to embrace the means of their attempts at self-determination, he alienates himself from the community, and this isolation signifies a departure from the personalist tradition and suggests that he is an obsolete force in the community. Thus, Reverend Jameson's position as a relic of the Church intimates his departure from Pope John Paul II's personalist belief in participation. In "The Person: Subject and Community," he affirms the social nature of reality and defines participation "as a property of the person, a property that expresses the ability of human beings to endow their own existence and activity with a personal dimension when they exist and act together with others" (237). In this regard, Reverend Jameson fails to uphold the personalist belief in participation as his view of appropriate action clearly differs from the rest of the men's definitions of justice and social action.

Reverend Jameson also alienates himself from his community through failing to relate to assert himself to the other men, yet this failure is indicative of the old men's struggles, paradoxically revealing the similarities between the old men and the preacher they undermine. Continuing his description of the seemingly inept minister, Clatoo notes that Reverend Jameson is physically isolated from the men and explains, "And standing away from everybody else, all to himself, was that preacher Jameson. He looked from one of us to another, from one to another. He wanted to say something, but he didn't know where to start" (52). Here, the use of the word "that" (52) reveals their opinion of the preacher as Clatoo essentially objectifies him as a relic of an ineffective religious institution. This objectification couples with Reverend Jameson's physical distance from the rest of the men, which Clatoo repeatedly comments on, and indicates

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<sup>50</sup> Critic Suzanne Jones argues that the old men use violence as the primary means of asserting their dignity and self worth (47).

the disconnect between the minister—the physical embodiment of the Church—and the community.

Though the preacher physically separates himself from his community, his isolation is not merely physical, and his struggle to speak reflects both his humanness and his fundamental differences from the other men. Reverend Jameson ironically fails to assert himself when that same sense of self-determination is precisely why the men gather on Mathu's yard (52). While his inability to speak is indicative of his ineptitude, this struggle to assert himself is humanizing and actually reveals the similarities between the preacher and the other men. The old men come to Mathu's defense to atone for their past inaction—to prove their self-determination. Because the lack of self-determination that marks their past, Reverend Jameson's inability to express his disapproval of the situation humanizes him. His silence could reflect a deep, inexpressible grief for his people and their current situation—grief over the men standing only to risk being killed. To dismiss Reverend Jameson as merely a distant preacher is to overlook the complexity of his character, as he simultaneously rejects the men's means of asserting themselves and experiences the same tension between passivity and action, linking the preacher to the experiences of his community.

While Reverend Jameson experiences the similar tensions as the old men, Candy Marshall undercuts his personhood in an act that highlights his removal from the community while humanizing him, emphasizing his paradoxical embodiment of Catholic personalism. With the exception of Reverend Jameson, the old men argue about who shot Beau Boutan, all asserting their own guilt. Harshly responding to the preacher's opposition, Candy exclaims, "I've already told you to go on home . . . I've been telling you for the last hour—you don't want to be here, go on home. I don't want to have to tell you anymore" (54). Candy's patronizing

remarks emasculate the preacher as she exerts authority over him and expresses that he is clearly not wanted.<sup>51</sup> However, her request for Reverend Jameson to leave carries dual implications for his embodiment of Catholic personalism. On one hand, her command illustrates his distance from the concerns of the men and highlights his impotence as a pastor and member of the community. While she undercuts his authority, her demands also speak to Reverend Jameson's dedication to his community as he remains with them even when he is clearly unwanted, which humanizes him and upholds personalism's value for community.

Despite the persecution he faces from his own community, Jameson's response signifies his devotion to his people, as well as his embodiment of Catholic personalism, and reveals his frustration with the men's view of him as an impotent preacher and part of the community. His retort to Candy's commands emphasizes the connection he feels to both the people and the quarters:

“This is my place, Candy,” Jameson said. “I ain't got no home if they burn this place down.” He turned to the rest of us, beads of sweat just popping out of his head and running down his face. “Can't y'all understand what I'm trying to say to y'all?” he asked us. Nobody answered him. He looked from one to another, but nobody answered him. Most of the people wouldn't even look back at him. (54)

Capitalizing on the sense of place and home, Reverend Jameson underscores his connection to the quarters. This connection should appeal to the old men who also highly value community, yet

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<sup>51</sup> Tracing the development of the black church in America, William H. Becker explains that preachers often become models of manhood for their communities, demonstrating how to assert themselves as men: “Yet even recognition of this ‘doubleness’—this polarity between religion as an opiate and religion as a stimulus to protest—does not constitute a full appreciation of the contribution the black church has made to the earthly liberation of its people. That contribution goes beyond the simple either/or of passive submission and active resistance to encompass the realm of communal nurture in which a people develops and symbolizes its answer(s) to the question, ‘What does it mean to be a man?’” (179-80). This question of manhood—and on a deeper level, of personhood—is a central theme in *A Gathering of Old Men*.

the breakdown in their communication illuminates the distance between the preacher and his community, especially since they share a strong tie to this sense of home. Since both the old men and the preacher express their connection to the community, the men's failure to even look at Reverend Jameson makes him more human—and even pitiable—in spite of his distance from them. The men essentially fail to give their preacher the same respect they seek, and the control over their gaze undermines Reverend Jameson's personhood. Although Reverend Jameson acts consistently with personalism and expresses his dedication to his community, Candy and the men undercut this devotion, which humanizes him in spite of his impotence.

Furthering the connection between his impotence and humanness, Reverend Jameson's emotional response to Candy's command is at once emasculating and humanizing, emphasizing the tension between his ineptitude and personalism. After the preacher futilely attempts to assert his connection to the quarters, he expresses his defeat through crying and imploring Clatoo to convince Mathu to end this string of false confessions. Clatoo fails to dignify his the preacher with a response—or even a glance—and claims that he “come here to stand, not to talk” (55). Showing derision for Reverend Jameson's emotional expression, Clatoo contrasts the preacher's emotions with the masculinity the other man seek to assert. Jameson departs from the men's perception of masculinity by both showing emotion and refusing to take an active role in their stand, and Clatoo's distinction between standing and talking reinforces the differences between the preacher and his community. The men view Jameson's desire to talk as a sign of his ineptitude, believing that talking will do little to solve their problems. Jameson is not wholly inept, though, because he pursues mutual understanding to ensure the safety of the men in his community. Reverend Jameson's response to Clatoo's distinction between talking and acting reflects his concern for the men, as he asks them, ““That's what y'all come here for? . . . To die?

Y'all think that'll make up for all the hurt?" (55). Through posing these questions, the preacher shows both his concern for—and frustration with—these men who insist on confessing to Beau Boutan's murder, even if it means their deaths. This scene illustrates the fundamental tension between faith and action because however noble and human these concerns may be, the preacher is still somewhat impotent since he fails to persuade the men to assert their personhood through other means.

In addition to opposition from Candy and Clatoo, Beulah's recurring acts of silencing Reverend Jameson shows her view of the preacher as an inept authority, illuminating the tension between the preacher's concern for the community and his impotence. He continues to challenge the men, trying to persuade them that Sheriff Mapes will know that the men are making false confessions, and Beulah asserts her authority over him through language. She tells the preacher, "Reverend Jameson, just shut up . . . Just shut up. Nobody listening to you; so just shut up. Go on back home, like Candy said. Nobody listening to you today" (56). This instance marks the second time women silence the preacher, who is emasculated through being denied the right to speak.<sup>52</sup> Since Reverend Jameson refuses to carry a gun, his voice is the only weapon he has to assert himself and offer an alternative to the old men's stand, yet Beulah strips him of this power. Her view of the preacher as an inept authority escalates as she couples his ministerial title with the command to be quiet, positioning him as an even more obsolete force in the community. Although Beulah's words highlight his impotence, her act of silencing Reverend Jameson humanizes him and is even pitiful because he genuinely wants to assert himself and prevent the old men from facing an unnecessary death.

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<sup>52</sup> Reverend Jameson's impotence contrasts with the historical view of the African-American preacher. Becker argues that since the days of slavery, "the preacher was manifestly a man and a leader of men. In addition to whatever other symbolic functions he had, he symbolized self-assertive masculinity and integrity for the slaves who watched and heard him" (181). In contrast to these early preachers, Reverend Jameson's attempts at self-assertion are undermined by his community.

Reverend Jameson's desire to assert himself as a meaningful force in the community falters as Mapes attempts to beat the men into a true confession, and the preacher's inability to stand reflects both his impotence and humanity. Mapes begins calling men to interrogate them, slapping those who refuse to affirm his suspicion that Mathu murdered Beau Boutan. Reverend Jameson alienates himself from the other men through his noticeable weakness: "Unlike the two older men, whose faces snapped to the side when Mapes hit them, Reverend Jameson staggered and fell flat on his back. The people looked at him, but no one said anything. After a while he raised his head and looked at Candy the way a little dog would look up at its mistress after it had been punished. But Candy showed him no sympathy" (71). Although he is the only man to fall when Mapes hits him, the language here reveals Reverend Jameson's weakness—a weakness that reflects his humanity. After failing to withstand Mapes's act of violence, he looks to his community for sympathy and support, reflecting the personalist view of reality being fundamentally social. While he attempts to embody the personalist definition of community, his community refuses him, which humanizes him and causes us to look on him with the sympathy the others fail to give. The interplay between Reverend Jameson's impotence and humanness reveals his struggle to demonstrate personalist values in a community that insists on his alienation.

Despite this glimpse into his humanness, Reverend Jameson adds a level of complexity to his character as he expresses derision for the rest of the men and their choice of social action, isolating himself and seemingly departing from the personalist value for community. It is important to note that Reverend Jameson is the only man who asks permission to speak, as if he intrudes on the old men's attempts to tell their own stories (103). When he asks to speak, though, he does not address the rest of the men but instead seeks permission from Mapes—the white

representation of the law. Forced to turn to those outside the black community, the preacher's question further signifies his isolation, yet "[h]e wanted Mapes to know he wanted no part of us. Still Mapes looked at him like he hated him, too" (103). Reverend Jameson's willful separation from the rest of the men undercuts his pastoral responsibility to his community, indicating his failure to uphold personalism. Though the preacher looks to Mapes—his only ally—for sympathy, this attempt at human connection and support fails. Reverend Jameson becomes a pitiable figure, then, as he is consistently denied the community the old men experience. Because he faces scorn from those on Mathu's yard, the preacher displays a deep strength of character in spite of his apparent ineptitude—a humanness that comes from his different vision for social action.

Stemming from this derision toward Reverend Jameson and his departure from the men's definition of self-assertion, the men intensify their threats against the preacher as the novel progresses and threaten him with violence, revealing their perception of him as an inept authority. Beulah intensifies her threats against Jameson, this time promising physical violence; Rooster offers to shoot him; and Dirty Red suggests that Snookum—a mere child—the minister (106). As if the men and women's attempts to silence Jameson were not enough, using a child to correct his preacher is even more emasculating and furthers the image of an obsolete, impotent preacher. Here, it is important to note that the community threatens Reverend Jameson with the same violence they want to enact on Fix and his men. By linking him to the Cajun vigilantes through these threats, the community essentially positions the preacher on the same level as its oppressors, viewing the minister as a social force that impedes progress and self-actualization. Though the community's threats alienate Reverend Jameson even more, his response demonstrates his personalist values. When asked why he refuses to go home, he counters, "This

is my place' . . . He said it so quietly you couldn't hardly hear him. He looked up at Mapes. 'This is my place, Sheriff'" (106). The ambiguity surrounding the preacher's use of the word "place" (106) carries significant implications that reflect his embodiment of Catholic personalism. While this place refers to his community and home, it also connotes a sense of duty—a deep connection and obligation this community. Both of these implications—the connection to his home and his responsibility—redeem him in spite of the men's view of his impotence.

While we see glimpses of Reverend Jameson's humanness and personalist devotion to the community, he remains ignorant of the men's activity, heightening the Church's removal from the community and positioning him as an impediment to social change. Throughout the course of the day, the men go behind Mathu's house to retrieve shells for their guns to prepare for Fix's arrival—except for the preacher. Rooster comments on Reverend Jameson's ignorance, again linking him to the women: "And nobody knowed the difference. Not my wife, Beulah, not none of the other women, and surely not that crazy Jameson. We was more scared of him talking than we was anybody else" (168). By listing the preacher among the other women, Rooster reflects the men's view of Jameson as an emasculated, obsolete figurehead in the black community. However, this image of Reverend Jameson's ineptitude contrasts with Rooster's fear of Reverend Jameson talking to Mapes. Rooster concludes that the preacher would divulge their plans to arm themselves, putting an end to their act of self-assertion. This fear underscores the preacher's isolation from his community and ineptitude, as he is ignorant of the men's basic plan of asserting their identities through using violence if necessary. At the same time, Rooster's aversion to Jameson talking indicates his influence, though minimal, in the community. This influence departs from the men's vision of social action and renders the preacher impotent in the eyes of their community. Reverend Jameson opposes the men's vision for social progress,

highlighting the division between the men and the Church as they seek to define themselves apart from any institution.

Reverend Jameson embodies the paradoxes of a personalist ethic as he remains devoted to the community he is alienated from, and the old men pursue social action outside the context of the Church. The men see the minister's weaknesses—his lack of physical strength and opposition to their stand—and dismiss him as an impotent religious authority who has little impact on their journey of self-discovery and self-assertion. Instead of finding redemption through Catholic personalism's belief in a personal, active God, the men redefine redemption as communal, atoning for their past history of passivity by coming together.<sup>53</sup> Stemming from the men's views that self-assertion occurs in the context of community, Reverend Jameson's absence bookends the novel, and the conclusion of the men's confrontation with the Cajun vigilantes allows the men to define themselves in terms of their participation in the community, not the Church; however, the preacher's absence allows the men to recognize their dignity and humanity, which is necessary for spiritual redemption.

In a meeting from which Reverend Jameson is absent, Mathu details his view of God and community and advocates a kind of redemption that is generated from his people, simultaneously upholding the personalist value for community yet departing from the Catholic conception of a personal God. Retreating to the privacy of Mathu's house, the men—with the exception of their preacher—meet before Mapes arrests Mathu, who is moved by his community's support. Because of the men's action in standing, Mathu experiences a type of conversion and alters his perception of the men in his community, drawing a distinction between their solidarity and the

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<sup>53</sup> For Gaines's old men, the act of coming together as a community, not the exertion of violence, allows them to assert their dignity and manhood. In an interview with Mary Ellen Doyle, Gaines recalls that he originally wanted to title the novel *The Revenge of Old Men* but he "didn't see them doing anything for revenge" (*Conversations With Ernest Gaines* 167).

Church: “I been changed. Not by that white man’s God. I don’t believe in that white man’s God. I been changed by y’all. Rooster, Clabber, Dirty Red, Coot—you changed this hardhearted old man” (182). Mathu’s commentary on the Divine reveals his belief that God is opposed to the black man’s progress. Because of his affiliation with the Church, Reverend Jameson signifies this religious tradition, embodying Mathu’s criticism of the Church being antithetical to social action and progress.<sup>54</sup> This view is inconsistent with Catholic personalism’s fundamental belief in a benevolent, personal God, and Mathu holds that communal action provides the impetus for his redemption. Through the men’s stand to atone for their past inaction, the community seems more present and real to Mathu than God does. Rewriting the redemption narrative of the Church, Mathu elevates the value of the community over the Divine, undercutting the foundation of Catholic personalism while upholding its emphasis on the communal. In large measure, Reverend Jameson’s diminished role throughout the rest of the novel allows the men to atone for their inaction in the context of their community.

As the preacher’s impotence suggests his struggle to embody Catholic personalism, the men ironically meet the ideal personalist in Charlie, the man who returns to confess to Beau Boutan’s murder and embodies personalism’s connection between human dignity and redemption. We first encounter Charlie through Lou Dimes, who describes the murderer as “the quintessence of what you would picture as the super, big buck nigger” (186). Dimes’s animalistic, essentialist language undercuts Charlie’s personhood, robbing him of the dignity that personalist theology affirms in him. Despite Dimes’s assaults on his personhood, Charlie counters the white man’s stereotypes and voices his manhood, rewriting the narrative of his own personhood and remaining consistent with personalism. Speaking his self into existence, Charlie

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<sup>54</sup> Mathu’s criticism of the Church is not a new one in African-American literature and theology and reflects the charge of divine racism. William R. Jones asserts that the question of God’s care for the oppressed racial Other is central to a black understanding of Christian theology (849).

counters the white man's stereotypes and asserts his own identity, repeating the phrase "I'm a man" (187) at least seven times, addressing this statement to the white people there—Candy, Lou, and Mapes.<sup>55</sup> Charlie's repetition reinforces his personhood, and this understanding of his humanity is necessary for his future redemption. His use of simple, short sentences heightens the emotion of this moment as he, much like the elderly black men congregating in Mathu's house, begins to realize—and vocalize—his inherent value. Because these assertions of personhood occur after the comments on Charlie's physical body, his words undercut the white man's linguistic control over his identity. In her article linking masculinity and violence, Jones argues that language upholds "gender ideology" (47). Charlie's repetition of this poignant phrase, then, reinforces his manhood, and he continues to repeat this sentiment before he confesses to the murder: "I ain't Big Charlie, nigger boy, no more. I'm a man. Y'all here me? A man come back. Not no nigger boy. A nigger boy run and run and run. But a man come back. I'm a man" (187). He emphatically repeats this discriminatory language as a means of rejecting the stereotypes of the cowardly black man. Instead of failing to accept responsibility for his crime, Charlie defines his personhood through both his language and his actions. Demonstrated through language, this acceptance of responsibility corresponds to critic Raphael Lambert's discussion of the oral tradition, which he argues refers to both actual words and behavioral patterns of a particular community (79). Though Charlie's assertion reflects the oral tradition's connection of language and action, it also demonstrates his embodiment of the personalist belief in action arising out of an understanding of human dignity.

Charlie continues to subvert the white definition of his personhood through language and naming, highlighting his newfound sense of self-determination and appropriating Catholic

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<sup>55</sup> Charlie also asserts his manhood to Mathu, his godfather—an act that reflects the communal responsibility arising from an understanding of his dignity (187).

personalism's connection between dignity and action. As he begins to tell his story, he interrupts the account of Beau Boutan's murder and asks to be called "Mr. Biggs" (187), claiming that members of the white community, like Candy Marshall and Sheriff Mapes, are given titles that necessitate respect. Critic William T. Mailon argues that this request and interruption clashes with the dominant Southern culture's assumption that only white people could hold titles of nobility (51). By contrast, Charlie's assertion of personhood gives him the courage to ask to be called by his proper name—his true identity and not the white version of his identity. As he recognizes his humanity, he must first reject the white community's appellations and name himself, a familiar trope in the canon of African-American literature. This challenge of white authority corresponds to what Keith Clark calls "sass," which "becomes a vehicle for black men's resituating themselves as subjects, a way to counter a legacy of abuse, be it verbal or physical" (202). Through defying the white conventions of naming, Charlie positions himself as being worthy of respect and dignity, upholding one of the foundational tenets of personalism. And this assertion of his identity allows Charlie to combat the passivity that plagues his life as an African-American man. According to Mailon, in the rejection of the Southern social system that only allows white men to have titles and formal names, Charlie asserts himself as a man "because [his] dialogue is on [his] own terms" (57), endowing him with a measure of control over his identity and remaining consistent with the personalist view of self-determination.

As Charlie comes to a fuller realization of his humanity and responsibility to act, he begins to act and speak like a preacher, providing the ultimate subversion of Reverend Jameson's authority as he comes to an understanding of personalist ideals. Lou Dimes likens Charlie to a minister, and after the man tells his story "[h]e was exhausted. But there was something in his face that you see in faces of people who have just found religion. It was a look of having been

freed of this world. He passed his hand over his sweaty face and head; then he looked at Mathu . . . ‘I done dropped a heavy load. Now I know I’m a man’” (193). In this significant speech, Charlie reveals the power of self-confession and action, and his decision to confess to Beau’s murder allows him to view himself as a valuable, dignified human being. For Charlie, this revelation of his personhood is likened to a religious experience, demonstrating that an understanding of his humanity is necessary for redemption. In these scenes, Charlie—not Reverend Jameson—functions as an ideal personalist as he takes action out of his newfound understanding of his dignity.

Although Charlie is ultimately killed when Luke Will and his cronies come to seek revenge, the scene surrounding his death is full of religious significance and reflects personalism’s emphasis on community, intimating the communal nature of redemption and suggesting the reconciliation between faith and action. As Charlie is dying, each of the men, women, and children lay their hands on him, “hoping that some of that stuff he had found back there in the swamps might rub off on [them]” (211). Before the community lays hands on him, however, Mathu “raise[s] Charlie’s head out of the dust” (211)—an act of pride in his godson’s confession and courage in the battle. Mathu’s act of tenderness marks an effort to assert Charlie’s dignity once more in his lifetime, and the dying man’s act of looking at the people congregating around him emphasizes the value of communal responsibility, as he silently charges them to carry on his legacy of personhood and action. Through discovering his dignity and acting on his understanding of personhood, Charlie becomes a symbol of the power of achieving a sense of self-definition for the larger black community. While his death reflects the consequences of black assertions of identity in a Southern society, the community’s response suggests a level of hope, and their act of solidarity upholds personalism’s value for community.

While Reverend Jameson's absence bookends *A Gathering of Old Men*, he is not wholly impotent and removed from the concerns of his community but instead embodies the tension between faith and social action. As the men collectively decide to assert themselves and come to Mathu's defense, Reverend Jameson's absence ironically fosters this act of communal solidarity. In spite of their preacher's absence in the beginning of the novel, the old men come to an understanding of their humanity and inherent value, finally esteeming themselves as men. This understanding of personhood provides the basis for communal action, as the old men resolve to act based on an understanding of their dignity. Their decision to falsely implicate themselves in Beau Boutan's murder reflects a different perception of social action than the one Reverend Jameson holds, and this difference informs the conflict between the men and their preacher. Despite advocating opposite means of self-assertion, the old men and Reverend Jameson share the same value for community, yet the discrepancy between their conceptions of communal activity reflects the tension between Christianity and social action.

### Conclusion: Gaines, Reconciliation, and Living “Together with Others”

In each of these novels, the primary point of division between Gaines’s pastors and their communities is the differing perceptions of what constitutes social action and how this action should be appropriated. This disconnect between preachers and social action surfaces in *A Lesson Before Dying*, as Reverend Ambrose and Grant Wiggins hold seemingly conflicting views on how to respond to the injustice of Jefferson’s execution. Viewed by the novel’s narrator as an ineffective social force, Reverend Ambrose centers his definition of social action on his responsibilities as a pastor and endeavors to provide spiritual and emotional support for members of his community. But Grant, who represents the views of the younger black community, questions the role of the Church—and any institution—in alleviating injustice, wrestling with whether social action could change Jefferson’s circumstances. Reverend Martin of *In My Father’s House* adds to the discussion of the Church’s perception of social action through being at once a preacher and a civil rights activist. Though active on the public and political stage, Reverend Martin is an absent, deadbeat father in his own home. Deciding to forge a connection with his bastard son, Martin shifts his focus from his role in the Civil Rights Movement to his role as a father, and this altered focus ultimately alienates him from his community. This isolation from community is one of the worst fates in Gaines’s fiction, and Reverend Jameson experiences both alienation and antagonism from his people in *A Gathering of Old Men*. For the men, their stand with Mathu—even if it requires violence—constitutes effective social action. Reverend Jameson, however, opposes this vision and calls for reconciliation between the old men and white Cajuns. Taken together, the experiences of these three men position the discrepancy between the Church and community’s perception of social action as one of the central tensions facing the black community.

What is so human about these novels is that Gaines does not provide a simple answer on how to reconcile faith with the need for social change; instead, these tensions illustrate the complexity of what it means to be human in the context of community. Both Gaines's novels and Catholic personalism affirm the value of human communities and argue that we cannot be fully human apart from community. At its most basic level, we depend on other people for our very existence and physical survival, and human connection provides us with a sense of belonging and mutual support. But despite the importance of human connection, disagreement between members of a community is inevitable, as evidenced in the conflict between the pastors and their communities in Gaines's novels. Pope John Paul II's discussion of opposition and community in *The Acting Person* illuminates, and even works toward reconciling, the tensions in the works examined in this thesis. The belief in the common good underlies John Paul II's commentary on the meaning of conflict within a community:

We have experience of innumerable different types of oppositions that have been continually expressed in the course of man's existing and acting "together with others," which show that those who in this way stand up in opposition do not intend thereby to cut themselves off from their community. On the contrary, they seek their own place and a constructive role in the community; they seek for *that* participation and *that* attitude to the common good which would allow them a better, a fuller, and a more effective share of the communal life. (286)

Ironically, division in a community stems from a shared goal, a desired end. Yet in spite of these deep divisions, both the Gainesian preachers and their communities share the same goal: working to uphold the dignity of human beings.

Although these novels seem to position the pastors and communities as enemies, Gaines

could be arguing for a middle way—a means of reconciling the recurring tension between faith and action. The interplay between the unified belief in the common good and the resulting division over how to achieve that good permeates the canon of African-American literature, situating Gaines's works in the established cultural conversation. From Washington to Du Bois and Dr. King to Malcolm X, black writers and activists have differed on their views of effective, appropriate means of racial uplift and protest while universally acknowledging the need for change. Gaines's preachers and communities follow in the same tradition, but instead of fully advocating either means of protest, these novels could reflect the need for pastors and activists to be allies and complement, not compete with, each other's vision for social action. Pope John Paul II affirms this complementarian view of community, arguing that "[t]he structure of a human community is correct only if it admits not just the presence of a justified opposition but also that practical effectiveness of opposition required by the common good and the right of participation" (287). Because opposition is essentially valuable for any community, Gaines could be positioning the preachers and larger communities against each other to reveal that reconciliation and mutual cooperation are necessary in fostering social change. In Gaines's fictional universe, the disconnect between pastors and their communities points to the fundamental need for reconciliation—to the Divine, to each other, and to an understanding of the nature of personhood.

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