

## **The Semiosis of Humour in Gaine's *A Gathering of Old Men***

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### **Introduction**

Gaines can be described as a Black American writer in that his cultural identity clearly emerges from his prolix writings. Born and raised in the South, he has been undoubtedly influenced by the rural black life depicted in his novels. As a matter of fact, the South and especially Louisiana is often used as a setting for his stories. And his mastery of the black vernacular shows his closeness with the black people.

Nonetheless, the richness of his work lies in his ability to move from the particular to the universal. In fact, this attitude comes from his will to go beyond immediate concerns and deal with colourless considerations. In treating issues like family relationships, emasculation, manhood and dignity, Gaines targets a wider audience. Although he has been criticized for not being vocal enough of the segregation system of the South, his realistic portrayal of life in the South, can be seen as a valuable contribution to the improvement of the living conditions of his fellow black people. His novel entitled *A Gathering of Old Men* is part of this precious contribution.

Set in Louisiana during the 1970s, this novel is a colourful illustration of the long standing racial divide for which this region is known. As it re-echoes Gaines major themes, this story of the murder of a white farmer by the hand of a black, out of vengeance, underscores the need of change. Despite, the heroic struggle of the devotees of the Civil Right movements, some white people still remained adamant to change.

As change is never achieved by mere chance but by some conscious effort to see that things do not remain the same, Gaines could not have dodged his responsibility as a black writer by remaining silent. The reader of this novel is made to delve into the violence of a segregation system whose symbols are still alive. There are the quarters, the little black spot

in the bar – though the signs stating “For Whites Only”<sup>1</sup> do no more exist – and the lynching mob. Moreover, the Negro is still considered as a boy to remind us of his shameful condition.

As sad as this situation may be, Gaines has succeeded in mingling humour with the gloomy accounts of the characters. In fact, the seriousness of the conflict is belittled to some endurable proportions by the overall comic tone of the novel. Apparently, there lies an appeal in this aesthetics. And the aim of the present analysis is to find the significance of this daring association.

## 1. The Incongruity of the Comical

There is always an unexpected and disconcerting feature, a surprising effect to literature whose role is not just to fulfil the reader’s expectations, but to chock him in order to please. As Iser puts it: “A literary work is not a documentary record of something that exists or has existed, but it brings into the world something which hitherto did not exist, and at best can be qualified as a virtual reality.”<sup>2</sup> At first glance, the murder of a white man by a black man is something unusual per see in the South. Then, the tone of the book is so comical that the whole thing seems “astonishing but not serious”<sup>3</sup> p212.

### 1.1 The Funny Tone of the Book

The tone of a story is the general mood of that story. It can also be defined as the voice of the narrator. The beauty of storytelling in *A Gathering of Old Men* lies in the multiple narrator technique used by Gaines. His narrators tell the story in turn at the first person singular. Since they take part in the story as characters, their accounts are to be considered as reliable. They all share in the same human drama which they relate in turn with objectivity and realism. Though they are many, their stories show a perfect cohesion as far as the tone is concerned. All these narrators do have a real sense of humour. As a matter of fact, the seriousness of the issues coexists with the comic tone of the whole story.

The attention of a conscious reader is drawn by the choice of George Eliot, Jr. aka Snookum, as the first homodiegetic narrator, to borrow the terminology of Genette<sup>4</sup>. The very fact that his account occurs at the onset of the narrative is of premium importance. It is known

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, [www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf](http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf), 24/09/2014, 10:05

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *How to Do Theory*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2006, p 58.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest J. Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men*, Vintage Contemporaries, New-York, 1983.

<sup>4</sup>

that the beginning of a novel has some technical functions, as it introduces the main elements of the writing technique. The first pages being the place where some key issues related to the setting, the plot, the narrative technique and the protagonist originate, they play an important role as to what may happen in the novel.

The book opens with the account of Snookum, a boy. Saying that he has some childish manners will be pointless since it is in the nature of a boy to be childish. Nonetheless his very presence has some significance. He is not only the first character but also the “person” which the writer chooses to play the role of the reader’s first interlocutor. Of course a child is a truthful witness by reason of his innocence. And Gaines could not have made a better choice to give a realistic picture. Nevertheless, the symbolism is related to the incidence of his childish manners on the tone of the book, seeing that it gives a comic impetus to the story.

A situation is said to be comical when it is funny in a strange way to the point that it provokes laughter. A number of utterances, circumstances and events are often described as comical. And their similarities make it difficult to categorize them. The reason why they seem so closely related is seen in the fact that they share the recognition and expression of incongruities such as paradoxes, absurdities, ridicules, parodies, mockeries and sarcasms, etc. In fact, incongruity is the subject matter of humour. Thus the novel of Gaines incorporates several instances of funny situations which range from the highest form of wit to its lowest counterpart. All these are often referred to as humour. Here, the term humour is misused to mean any type of comedy.

From the onset of the book, one is made to witness the funny tone of things. And the narrative closes on this humorous mood. Humour evolves from all kinds of incongruities, but language itself is purposely used to provoke laughter as seen in the accounts given by most of the characters in the book of Gaines. He explores the black vernacular to provide a regional coloration to his work. His characters make no room for grammatical rules in their use of language. Obviously, this is intended to draw a realistic picture of life in the Deep South. Nonetheless, the language of these “people” is bound to make the reader laugh.

Several sentences can account for this reality. The following sentence is drawn from a dialogue: “Them ain’t shot, shoot,” p 49. Apparently, the author has kept its oral phrasing to make his dialogue livelier. But still, the apparent failure to respect grammatical rules makes this sentence incongruous and funny. Even the account of the murder which should keep all its seriousness follows this funny pattern when Uncle Billy, trying to own up, says three times: “I kilt him” p 67-68. Moreover, sentences like “That’s for sure. Not them two men.

Them was men – them” or “We goes fishing every Tuesday and every Thursday” p27 pervades in the book.

Any utterance, to be clear, needs to keep the rules by which words are combined or the syntax. Seeing the lot of discourse, it is easy to understand why Mapes takes offence at the clumsy nature of the sentences. In trying to get a full picture of the events and know the murderer of Beau, he needs to understand the account of the old men. Not only do they try to hide the truth by claiming they all did it, but the pseudo language they use leaves the oddest effect. The language underscore the illiteracy of these old men as it distorts the syntactic rules. Disgusted by this comical situation, Mapes the sheriff being the symbol of law and order says “Tell me in English what he is saying in Gri-gri” p 90.

A look at the dialogues at the semantic level amplifies this humoristic tone as it explores several types of comedy. The book starts with a trite story of an evening meal involving a woman and her grandchildren. The discussions that occur among them make room for a stream of invectives. Obviously the threats of this grandmother against her grandchildren are not to be taken to the letter. In turn, she undergoes the ridicule of Toddy, one of them who rudely says: “I ain’t no turnip-eating machine”. To what she answers: “You better turn into one ‘fore I get back in that kitchen”p4. The incongruity in this discussion is found in the use of the unkind words that make the characters look ridiculous. The overall funny tone foretells the place of humour and subsequently, its function in the representation of the racial tension which serves as the framework of the novel.

## **1.2 Humour and the Harsh Reality of Racial Tensions**

Martin Luther King was right when he said in his famous speech entitled “I Have a Dream” that “1963 (was) not an end but a beginning”<sup>5</sup> in the fight of the black for racial equality. The events related in the book state that segregation is still going on in this part of the South. First, Gaines could not have chosen a better setting to dramatize the shameful condition of the black. The occurrence of Marshall Plantation is undoubtedly an ideological choice in that it epitomizes the plague of racism.

A hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the plantation system still exists along with its ridicules and horrors. Then, the black community is also “the victim of the

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<sup>5</sup>Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, [www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf](http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf), 24/09/2014, 10:05

unspeakable horrors of police brutality”<sup>6</sup>. Mapes, the county sheriff is the embodiment of this brutality. He is in his seventies, and from his long experience with the blacks, he has learned how to infantilize and intimidate them by using outright violence.

Then, the black community lives in a constant fear by reason of some white “vicious racists”<sup>7</sup> who perpetuate the Klan tradition. Luke Will stands as the perfect spokesman of this category of people whose main concern is to keep the black in a state of slavish fear and submission. While the devotees of the civil right movements try to bring in racial justice, Luke Will and his gang ironically endeavour to “keep things running smoothly in the parish”. In fact their dirty job consists in “turning over nigger school buses, throwing a few snakes into nigger churches during prayer meetings, or running niggers out of what used to be all-white motels and restaurants”. p159.

The tension which evolves as a consequence of the lingering effects of racial inequity permeates the recriminations of the black men who gather in Mathu’s yard. When read closely, their stories are made up with some deep feelings of hatred, contempt, grudge and sadness. Even their humour re-echoes the permanent state of contention which prevails between both communities, as shown in its different forms used here.

Humour has a long history in literature<sup>8</sup>. In English literature finds its origin in the tales of Chaucer<sup>9</sup>. Generally, it is used as synonymous of the term irony. Like any other literary issue, humour cannot be easily defined. But still, it can be inferred that it is the “quality of being amusing or comic especially as expressed in literature or speech”<sup>10</sup>.

Though they are use as synonyms, both terms have some nuances that make them technically different. Humour is a sophisticated method that requires a level of intellectualism from the user or the target, often referred to as the sense of humour. Its main difference with irony lies in the aim of the user. Humour is noble as the user’s intention is never to harm his audience. By cons, irony is mostly used in a hostile way. The user intends to ridicule his target.

Thus Mapes uses a coarse type of humour in his dealings with the old men whom he calls “Medicare patients” p 105. Certainly, their old age allows them to deserve the solidarity

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, [www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf](http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf), 24/09/2014, 10:05

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Noel Carroll, *Humour, a very short introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014

<sup>9</sup> Raj Kishor Singh, “Humour, Irony And Satire In Literature”, *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL)*, Vol. 3, Issue 4, Oct 2012, ISSN 2249-6912, , p 65-72

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p65.

of the community. So they should not be ashamed to receive medical treatment since Medicare as a government service has been created for this purpose. But the use Mapes makes is intended to hurt their feelings and present them as a useless bunch of “fellows”. His irony illustrates the patent contempt that he has for these old men. Of course Mapes having always treated these black men and their people with condescension, he cannot think or act otherwise.

But the black people whom he despises are not as stupid as he thinks since they do have a genuine sense of humour. A synopsis of their discussions has already shown the comic tone of the book. Yet a description of their humour goes further to prove the nobility of their souls. Their humour is both encompassing and rich. A rhetorical study of the forms of humour they use proves that they have a good command of this art. The typology of that humour reveals some instances of antiphrasis, overstatement, paradox and epitrope.

Janey in trying to convince Snookum to cultivate good manners tells him that as a boy, he has no right to address the adults by their name without using titles like “mister” or “miss”. Irritated at his refusal to comply, she ironically tells him “Thank you, sir”.p8. She uses this title not really out of politeness. In fact Snookum, being still a child, he does not deserve to be called “sir”. In saying exactly the contrary of what she thinks, Janey uses this antiphrasis to call Snookum to order.

Moreover, the visitor who comes across the scene of these old men holding the same type of gun and gathered in the same place may qualify it a paradox. And some simple reasons can explain this feeling. To start with, this is Louisiana and no black person can be bold enough to carry a gun in order to exercise vengeance against a white man. Then, these men are not young enough to take up such an action. Grant Bello who describes them, uses a great deal of humour. Taking Billy Washington, to illustrate the condition of these old black men, he insists on their physical weakness and on the paradox inherent to their decision: “Billy couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn if he stood two feet in front of it”p43. Yet he also claims to have killed Beau Boutan.

Then most of these old men have never been brave to stand and look a white man straight in the eyes let alone to challenge him for whatever reason. And here they are, ready to deal with a violent man like Fix Boutan, a Klan member whom they claim to have killed the beloved son. And Ella, Mat’s wife seems to notice the gravity and the paradox of this situation when she calls her husband a fool. Mat then answers back by an antiphrasis. “That’s right”. “Anytime we say we go’n stand up for something, they say we crazy. You right, we all gone crazy” p36.

If Mat is willing to risk his life, this might be foolish for his wife, but he has some good reason to do it. Before that very day, he has always taken life easy. In fact he has always behaved cowardly. And he only becomes aware of his lack of stamina when a boy whom everybody considers as a “sissy” - a person that is not brave - ironically reveals Mat his own lack of courage in an unexpected way:

“He said: “Something to do with Mathu, and something to do with Beau Boutan dead in his yard. That’s all I know, all I want to know. Up to y’all now, I done my part. Y’all can go and do like she say or y’all can go home, lock y’all doors and crawl under the bed like y’all used to. Me, I’m leaving.” Ashamed by such clairvoyance from a boy he has always treated with contempt, Mat reacts with irony when he tells to himself but as to the boy: “You better run out of Louisiana” p27. Here is a good example of epitrope since Mat is exhorting the boy to persist in his running though he wishes the boy could stop and tell him more about the murder.

The foregoing lines clearly show how Gaines has made proof of his mastery of the technique of humour. In any case this could not be coincidental as there lies beyond this technical choice a deep significance.

## 2. The Ideological Scope of Gaines’ Humour

The preceding pages in this analysis have shown the absurdity of comedy in this book which is definitely about racial segregation. Some may question the aesthetics of Gaines or go even further to opine that his choice is a justification of his lack of commitment to the black cause. Yet humour is also known as a quality which only intelligent and brilliant spirits do have and exhibit. “L’humour est marqué positivement: tout le monde aime l’humour; il est généralement considéré comme une espèce de comique amélioré, plus profond, plus fin et plus noble.”<sup>11</sup> Then an interpretation of the artistic choice of Gaines, which gives a conspicuous place to humour in all its manifestations, seems necessary to determine the reason of this incongruity.

What can be said about a novel treating the issue of racial segregation with comedy is possibly that its author intended to use humour as a panacea to alleviate the pain suffered as a

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard Gendrel, Patrick Moran, « Humour: panorama de la notion », [www.fabula.org/atelier.php?Humour%3A\\_panorama\\_de la notion](http://www.fabula.org/atelier.php?Humour%3A_panorama_de_la_notion), 25/09/2014. “Humor is marked positively: everyone likes humor; it is generally considered a more profound kind of comedy improved, finer and nobler”. My translation.

consequence of the deep wounds inflicted. Such an analysis could be true. Yet the significance of humour goes beyond the mere fact of soothing pain to dreaming about possible change.

## 2.1 The Soothing Virtue of Humour

In a broad sense, humour “fits into most areas of art and entertainment”<sup>12</sup>. So then humour is used to provide amusement and make people laugh in taking things easy. When it occurs in literature, humour is not a trivial whim of aesthetics. It is rather, a “tool, like characterization or dialogue..., a necessary element of fiction”<sup>13</sup>. If humour is a fully-fledged literary technique, then it assumes a more noble status. Like a pain killer, humour serves as a medicine to ease psychological pain. Thus, to reach the psyche of his audience, Gaines has to make use of some symbols that can appeal to his readers by dint of the funny nature of those signs.

A symbol has a more technical meaning in semiotics and it refers to the semiotic sign which can be classified under some categories called modes. The symbols or signs used to endow Gaines’s humour with a technical function mainly belong to the indexical mode. As Chamber puts it, the index is “a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified (regardless of intention) – this link can be observed or inferred...”<sup>14</sup>

Thus the first sign deals with the men that gather at Mathu’s yard, to claim that they murdered Beau, are all in their sixties and seventies. Their old age and dim sight cannot enable them to shoot at a short distance with precision let alone to score a bull’s eye on a moving target. Their march resembles more a cortège than a martial walk. While some are “dragging their gun in the dust”, others are carrying it like a stick of wood. Most of them cannot walk even straight. One of them cannot “stop blinking long enough to sight, let alone kill a man” p 48. And on top of it all, they are all shuffling and not striding out like soldiers. Yet each one of them is bearing a gun as he were going to wage war.

There is Yank who used to be a cowboy. Apparently nostalgic about his “glorious” past and now in his seventies, he still wears the same kind of clothes that he wore back then. p40. Yet instead of cowboy boots, he has on some rubber boots making him look funny. There is also old Coot, a First World War veteran. He is dressed up in his army uniform. “The

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<sup>12</sup>Raj Kishor Singh, *Op cit.* p65

<sup>13</sup> Raj Kishor Singh, *Op cit.* p67

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics, the Basics*, Routledge, London, 2002, p37.



uniform was all wrinkled and full of holes, but Coot wore it like it was something brand new. He even had on the cap, and the medal. Any over time the people woulda been laughing at Coot dressed up like that. p103”

To enforce the comedy in their characterization, all these old men are not referred to by their real names but by nicknames preceded by the mention of “aka” meaning “also known as”. One reason may account for the refusal of the author to use their real identity. Candy the white owner of Marshall Plantation who has convened them is eager to protect Mathu whom everybody believes to be the murderer. The nicknames they bear may serve for the purpose of keeping the secret about the murderer. But the truth of the matter is that it represents a mask.

A mask is a covering for all or part of the face which protects, hides or decorates the person wearing it. More than a disguise, the mask has a long tradition in anthropology. It is found on all continents and in all cultures, from the most primitive to the most modern regions with various significances attached to it. And as such the mask is closely relative to satire as Bakhtine puts it in his *Theory of the Novel*. The novelist often acts like a critic of his society. Sometimes, he needs to protect himself by wearing a mask. As Bakhtine puts it:

Le romancier a besoin d'un masque consistant, formel, lié à un genre qui définirait tant sa position vis-à-vis de son existence, que sa position vis-à-vis de l'exposé de cette existence. C'est ici que les masques du bouffon et du sot, transformés, bien sûr, de façon différente, viennent au secours du romancier<sup>15</sup>

*A Gathering of Old Man* has Louisiana for setting. This region being the Cajun country par excellence, Mardi Gras as a celebration is well known by the characters. But the mask they wear namely their nickname is rather symbolical. This covering gives them a second identity, the one they have always panted after. From nigger boys, they have now turned into real men, ready to stand together and face the oncoming lynching mob of Luke Will with bravery.

Yet there is a pinch of fun in the use of the nicknames. A thorough onomastic study of the names could have revealed much about these names and nicknames. But still, they are

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<sup>15</sup>Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, Gallimard, Paris, 1978. p307. « The novelist needs a consisting of formal mask, bound to a genre that would define both his position vis-à-vis his life and his position vis-à-vis the presentation of this existence. This is where the masks of the jester and the fool, of course, in different ways, come to the aid of novelist” This translation is mine.

humorous because of their often onomatopoeic form. This is the case for Bing and Ding, these two Lejeune brothers. Their nicknames far from identifying them, helps in reinforcing the confusion between these twin brothers. Besides, “Both had on khakis and both had on straw hats, and you had to get right on them to tell who was who, and if you didn’t know Ding had the scar ‘cross the left side of his face, you still couldn’t tell which one you was talking to” p 48.

The comic effect created by the mention of these nicknames can be observed with the other nicknames. Thus during the trial that takes place at the end of the book, Clabber, Dirty Red, Coot, Chimley, Rooster are all nicknames whose mention has the effect of bringing the court to laugh even at such a serious occasion. In fact, at a point during the trial:

Everyone in the courtroom started laughing, including Judge Reynolds. The people passing by out on the street must have thought we were showing a Charlie Chaplin movie in there. That happened the morning of the third day, and until that evening when the trial finally ended, people were still laughing”. p213.

The third sign is the symbolism of the judge who presides over the court during the trial. Unlike Mapes who is the embodiment of police brutality, Judge Reynolds is presented as the archetypal grandfather. Lou Dimes, who narrates the trial, is a white journalist who is presented in the story as the friend of Candy. Due to his profession, his account is about the facts only and void of racial bias. He describes Judge Reynolds as “the archetypal grandfather or what you would want your grandfather to look like”p213.

By addressing the reader, he invites him to identify himself with the judge. This is the reason why he depicts him with benevolence and assures the reader that the judge has a “great sense of humor”. p213. Though Judge Reynolds warns that his old age should not be mistaken as a mark of softness, he surely is not going to be hard. By choosing a seventy years old judge with hair white as snow and having a great sense of humour to wield justice, Gaines invites his audience to envisage the possibility of justice and fairness. Finally, the humorous tone of this book appears as a skilful way to earn the sympathy of the reader in order to harp upon the crux of the matter.

## 2.2 A True World Vision

Black American writers are known for not refraining their passion when dealing with the issue of racial segregation. This attitude is due to their commitment to the plight of the black. They feel it as a duty to contribute at their best to the improvement of the image of the black man. This might be a noble attitude, seeing that the writer is not a mere entertainer. But commitment might also distort a work of art into a political pamphlet. And, the writer will be criticized for his single-mindedness and lack of objectivity.

In trying to avoid this trap, Gaines has chosen humour as a means of detachment. In fact he also wears the mask, not like his characters who take advantage of the nicknames the mask of their nicknames to assume another identity. His own mask reminds us of the figure of the jester, who uses the mask of comedy to elude any type of censorship which might arise as a consequence of his satire. Likewise, the actor who plays on the stage is protected by his fictitious identity which finally detaches him from reality. As society is ready to forgive the jester his eccentricity as well as his harsh criticism, the humoristic tone of the book of Gaines helps to approach this story of a racist murder with leniency.

The segregationist system has made it impossible for the black to display heroism to the point of claiming his rightful position as a citizen. And no black person is bold enough to think of murdering a white person. Thus, Gaines is expected to keep this statusquo if he wants his novel to be accepted by the white audience. He certainly has to fulfil their expectations by writing a story which obeys to the established rules. And part of the rules is that the black must remain submitted. And the system intends to keep him in remembrance of his duties for he still has no right to “look any white person in the eyes”.

Yet Gaines decides to give his fellow black men, all the dignity they deserve. With this act of heroism accomplished by MATT, who states clearly that he is no more “a nigger boy” but a man, the book gives these men their rightful recognition. The author could have chosen a more recommendable act and not a murder to dignify his old men. And some may question his choice as it could be considered as a license for crime. But, the value of humour in presenting the whole thing as lacking seriousness lies in the fact that anybody can read the novel with detachment. Thus Gaines appeases the feelings of his reader in this context of racial divide and invites him to deal with facts not emotions and feelings, in a more scientific perspective.

Feelings and emotions have the tendency of bestowing a one-sided view when it comes to racial relationships. They enforce the antagonism between two opposing communities. In this situation, each part claims to have the truth and be right about the way they treat the counterpart. The camps they make up are to be forever opposed and never to be reconciled. As seen in this analysis, the divide is so clear that any reconciliation seems impossible.

Though Gaines belongs to the black community, he invites his readers to have a broader view about the predicament of the characters and the conflict in which they find themselves entangled. In choosing the multiple narrator technique to deal with this conflict, he wears the mask and conceals the truth. Of course, the conflict evolves because of a murder. Then the figure of the sheriff reminds the reader of the detective story tradition, a tradition which is enforced by the culture of secrecy of the black community that tries to protect the murderer. But, Gaines has achieved his goal in luring even his characters on the truth about the murderer and about truth in general.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, by dint of this grand irony, Gaines laughs at established certainties. He proves that what is commonly held as true can be totally wrong. A coward can become the boldest of all if he has no other choice. A man that everybody holds in high esteem can be a sour old man, full of hatred and not having self-esteem. Though Manichaeism is ever present in the novel, it is not always easy to draw a dividing line separating good and evil. Black people can also display non commendable feelings. The son of a Klan member is not bound to be a vigilante like his father. He can even become an agent of reconciliation. Gaines' humour, far from being a mark of despair<sup>16</sup>, rather dignifies the Black people and invites them to hope in change for the better as evidenced in the fair ruling of Judge Reynolds.

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