



THE METAPHOR OF MARSHALL PLANTATION IN ERNEST JAMES GAINES' *OF LOVE AND DUST*.

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Introduction

The setting in a literary work means much more than a background for a story. It is a cultural space as well. Its interconnection with the characters produces meaning or sometimes acts for or against their social enhancement, whereas metaphors are used to represent abstract ideas or concepts. Apart from being a fact, the term 'Plantation' has a specific and connotative meaning in African-American literature. A Plantation is a separate space within an area with many other plantations or living spaces. One of the major characteristics of a plantation is its spatial size which makes it a place. Like a small territory, a plantation in its functioning is a political entity with a governor and his subjects. This is the type of structure in force at Marshall Plantation, in Ernest Gaines' *Of Love and Dust*.

Of Love and Dust offers a wide range of themes which frequently appear in Gaines' writing. What is at stake in this paper is the metaphor of his plantations. Following the lead of William Faulkner and his fictional "Yoknapatawpha County", Gaines creates his own setting in Southern Louisiana with the plantation as a nucleus.

Gaines' representation of the plantations covers a period of more than one hundred years involving two major events: Slavery and the Emancipation Proclamation 1863. In fact, Emancipation puts an end to slavery and encourages reconciliation between the conflicting groups. The process starts with Reconstruction. But, *Of Love and Dust* highlights a reconstruction which does not take into account the situation of colored people.

Like during slavery time, the plantation system continues during Reconstruction under the new exploiting system of sharecropping. As Gaines writes in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), "there is a flicker of light; and again then darkness." (65) The light refers to Blacks' hope for freedom during slavery, which is achieved during the Emancipation Proclamation. This light is shadowed by the "darkness," that is the suffering generated by the sharecropping system. The plantation in our study is that of Marshall Hebert in *Of Love and Dust*. The plot pictures the era of Reconstruction. It pinpoints Blacks' endurance face to Whites' social and economic power. The novel begins with 'Dust,' an ever present image in the novel, flying all over the place. Reconstruction, as for it, echoes true freedom, equality and justice for all, work opportunities for all plantations workers and improvement of living conditions for whites as well as for colored. Gaines' representation of the environment of the plantation at the time of Reconstruction constitutes the focus of this paper. A semiotic and semiologic analysis of the concept shows its importance in association with its functions. My argument revolves around



two points. First, the symbolism of Marshall's plantation reveals the basic role of southern plantation. The second point indicates the interaction between the plantation and its dwellers.

I – The Symbolism and the role of Marshall Plantation

Plantations in Gaines' work are representations of a number of the characters' interactions. In light of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Gaines creates his own fictional space in Southern Louisiana, his native land, and also one of the most radical places of America's South at the time of slavery. Gaines' territory is bordered by rivers: the Mississippi in the East, the Old Rivers in the North, the Atchafalaya in the West and The Parish of Baton Rouge and Iberville in the South. It is an enclosed space containing cities and plantations. The choice of this limited space is indicative of the restricted life of some of the characters. This limited space is as well the image of Gaines' childhood as shown in the following passage of an interview with Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooton in 1988:

My movement was limited when I was a kid growing up. I mean I had the field and things like that, but we were limited to the quarters as our living place. Just about everything we did was limited to the quarters. We went to the big city of New Roads every so often on Friday nights to see cowboy movies, but everything else was limited to that small area.¹

Marshall Plantation looks like southern plantation. It is a limited space with rare moments of joy and free times for slaves. All their activities are confined in the same space. The cabins located on both sides of the street are slaves' living areas. Usually, these cabins are narrow spaces, one-room, so much so that they can be easily broken and controlled.

However, slaves deny the destruction of their humanity by being confined in quarters. They therefore transform the quarters as a place of confinement and their status of controlled subservient laborers into a source of political unity, common striving, folk education and culture. Bound together as a community, they transcend their master's law and make the quarters a place to generate leadership and change. The unpainted cabins range along both sides of the road leading to the fields near the "Big House" or the overseer's residence. The plantation is the place where beliefs, dreams, values and attitudes are grounded in the past and in tradition. Black people are aware of their common background and the ill-treatment they undergo from their masters. The quarters are the slaves' primary place of education where they acquire knowledge, where they develop values and skills with which they learn to see the world and give meaning to their life. The community in these areas is a mixture of men and women living as a family supporting each other as in *A Gathering of Old Men*, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, and *A Lesson Before Dying*. In these novels, the demonstration of the black community's

¹ Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooton "Talking with Ernest Gaines," p. 221 in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995, p. 284.



mobilization around their brethren in times of hardship is displayed. But, because of his rebellious behavior, Marcus is set aside and confined into James Kelly's cabin.

Contrary to the cabins, the "Big House" stands aside. It is limited by fences, a gate and a big garden with a large yard with big trees. The geographical location of the house, its size, and the myth that surrounds it, are indicative of the owner's social and economic power. To preserve white supremacy and white women's sexual purity, white plantation owners create a class relationship. This enables them to perpetrate white dominance by organizing intra-group marriages among their children. They visit each other in time of festivities or assist each other during funerals. To avoid direct contact with black workers, Louisiana plantation owners hire Cajun overseers as monitors and intermediaries.

Thus, to run his workers, Marshall is helped by Sydney Bonbon whose house is a smaller frame house with an outdoor stairway leading to the boys' rooms or those of the unmarried independent young men of the family. He is Marshall's confidant in different matters. In *Of Love and Dust*, Sydney Bonbon and his household are the center of Cajuns preeminence. Reference is intermittently made to him and his wife Louise's family living in the swamp lands. Louise's parents have strong authority on her as they compel her to marry Bonbon by threatening and brutalizing her. Swamp dwellers and fishermen, they live in solidarity and protect each other. Fearing the reaction of Bonbon's brothers, Marshall uses Marcus to get rid of Bonbon. Apart from providing space for interaction between the characters, Marshall Plantation represents a historical landmark.

In *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1964), N. Scott Momaday writes that "the imaginative experience and the historical express equally the traditions of man's reality."² This means that both the fictional and the factual contribute to the whole understanding of the novel. Therefore, the plantation can variously be interpreted.

- The Economic function of Marshall's Plantation

The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 led to a gradual fading of the plantations, thus the collapse of the economic power of Southern aristocrats. The story of *Of Love and Dust* occurs during Reconstruction. The plot is composed of White, Cajuns and Blacks people living in the same area with different objectives. Life in Marshall Plantation is organized according to the southern codes. Whites are the upper class whereas the Cajuns constitute the middle class and the blacks the bottom class. Though living in the same South, the three communities are economically separated. Each of them has its own reason for living in this area. The plantation represents Marshall's major economic source of income. Cotton, tobacco, sugar cane, corn, are his main cash crops. For lack of mechanization, the maintenance of the plantation requires an abundant and cheap workforce. As such, like most of the plantation owners, Marshall is compelled to get rid of part of his properties by giving them to sharecroppers:

² Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, United States: University of New Mexico, 1916, p. 4



The plantation (or what was left of the plantation now) had its crops far back in the field. The front land was for the sharecroppers. The Cajuns had the front-east and best land, and the colored people (who were still hanging on) had the middle and worst land. The plantation land was farther back still, almost to the swamps. (*OLD*, 26)

During Reconstruction, large plantations are divided and shared to former workers. The allotment of Marshall's plantation justifies his pecuniary desire to maximize his earnings. Because of their skin color, when the large plantations are broken up for lack of heirs or money, Cajuns become the major tenants and use their racial connections with the owners to get the best lands. With this advantage, they produce more, make more profit, buy modern equipments and so desire more lands. In so doing, they consolidate Marshall's financial supremacy and improve their own economic situation. Upon request, lands are given to them to the detriment of Blacks.

By working hard to reduce the social restriction and deprivation, the Cajuns work the land with their tractors, without love. However, they move with the tide of the modern world with their tractors. Since they cannot fight Marshall, they only progress at the expense of Blacks.

The losers in the transaction are Blacks who were slaves, then sharecroppers and tenants on small plots. Dependent upon agriculture for livelihood, black residents of Marshall Plantation are victims of racial supremacy. They lose their lands, their young and grapple with the changes that are forced on them by plantation owners. They are assigned portions in arid areas as shown in the excerpt above. To maintain their land and ensure their accommodation and food, they work alternatively in Marshall's field. This system makes them permanently indebted to the white master. The plants, equipment, clothes and other items need for their field are taken from the store. These loans are paid until exhaustion. All in all, Blacks have no economic advantage. They are rather resource provider. Marshall's economic principles keep the workers to a needy and miserable life under pressure. Plantation work goes along with human exploitation, social injustice, social discrimination, racial segregation, therefore, slavery.

II – The plantation as a place of subjugation

Marshall's plantation is an autonomous entity structured according to southern racial organization dating from slavery. As discussed earlier, Gaines represents his plantations as hostile for the social uplift of some of its inhabitants. Hostility is felt at several levels: physical, psychological and sexual. Add to this, some historical and natural events have important symbolic values.

1- A place of segregation and physical affliction

Some places like the plantation store is among the most distinguished places in the quarter. It is another means of domination and segregation. Bond Blacks like Marcus, working in the plantation, are allowed to take anything they need in the store. But that adds to their time of bondage. The more things you take from the store, the longer your time of bondage. The Owner



of the plantation, therefore of the store, Marshall allows his workers to take anything they want in his store. As a bond convict, Marcus pays his debts with more years of forced labor. The plantation is also a place of exchange and quarrels. The bars' business moment occurs at pay-time. As such, most black men use their money in alcohol and prostitutes. Once drunk, they fight each other: "Black workers leave all their salaries there each end of the month. Like them, Marcus, the new comer, drinks and starts hitting a fellow black to create a mess inside the bar (*OLD*, 100). This place is as well a space of discrimination. The quarter's store is composed of segregated drinking rooms; the inner room is for Whites whereas the side room is for "niggers": "You could buy soft drinks in the store or if you were a white man, you could drink a beer in there, but if you were colored you had to go to the little side room – "The nigger room." (*OLD*, 42)

In addition to this tormenting attitude, many Blacks lose their dignity and live a submissive life in their masters' houses. They tell their children about their conditions as slaves and what white people represent in their life. Miss Julie Rand, for example, teaches Marcus the respect of white rules as do James Kelly and Aunt Margaret. Blacks must show every sign of respect while talking to or about Whites. They are not allowed to ask them questions. An illustration of this situation is offered through Kelly's incapacity to ask Bonbon about Marcus' life when he first brings the latter to him.

Though living in a community of friendship and togetherness, blacks have another kind of relationship among themselves. By their submissive behavior and obedience, some Blacks are given privileges to work as spies or "Whitemouth" in order to gain confidence or in exchange for money. They are also used by other casts to give information about complicated matters. Such characters appear in *Catherine Carmier* when two black men are used by the Cajuns to tell Raoul about the relationship between his daughter Catherine and Jackson Bradley, a black boy. The metaphor of the "Whitemouth" is illustrative of another dimension of the plantation. It is synonymous with playing the white man's role by adopting his attitudes. In addition to the human dimension of difficulties, there are the natural elements of the quarters.

Often, seasonal forces function as antagonistic agents helping white folks to achieve their goals. Some major items represent the plantation and its seasonal human activities when they appear. They also symbolize Blacks' suffering in southern plantations. The main season in Gaines' novels is summer. Also, high temperature is a major image in *Of Love and Dust*. It oppresses the inhabitants working in the field, going up and down the dusty roads, standing by or passing through gates or sitting on their front porches. These people keep complaining about the heat. The narrator states: "It was hot; it was burning up. You could see little monkeys dancing out there in front of you" (*OLD*, 33). Describing the sun on Marcus' head on the plantation James Kelly argues "That white hot bitch way there in the sky" (*OLD*, 28) works against Marcus. The work under that hot Louisiana sun, along with the brutal psychological circumstances created by Bonbon, is the first test to break Marcus.



The heat, combined with Blacks' ill-treatment symbolizes their harsh conditions on Marshall Plantation. Aunt Margaret or others sweat under the heat of the sun. But more importantly, they suffer from the "heat" of injustice, fear, inner trauma, and the toughness of life in the quarters. Along with the burning summer sun, the dry swamps favor the rise of dust that covers everything.

The theme of dust that interweaves the novel is a sign of uncleanness. Like the heat, the hot white dust covers the quarters and its inhabitants. When Marcus first appears with Sidney, they bring with them a cloud of dust to the quarter. In the same way, everywhere Marshall Hebert goes, he brings dust with him. One important thing to note is that in the novel, it is only the Whites who always bring dust with them. This may express the inhumanity in their relations with Blacks. Dust includes all kinds of dirtiness. During an interview with Charles Rowell, Gaines argued that: "Dust is the absence of love, the absence of life. These people wanted to love, but because of the way the system is set up, it was impossible to love. Dust."³ The plot is dominated by two forbidden interracial love stories: the first between Sidney Bonbon and Pauline and the second between Marcus Payne and Louise. In the end, Marcus is killed by Sydney Bonbon upon a secret arrangement of Marshall to get rid of both Sydney and Marcus. Marcus' death separates them all. The absence of love correlates the absence of life. The dust following Marshall symbolizes death that occurs by the end of the novel. Gaines states in an interview with John O'Brien "I think that the dust is death. When a man dies he returns to dust." If you lived on a plantation you would find that there's no value to dust at all; it's just there."⁴ As the preacher says at Marcus' funeral, "Man is here for a little while, then gone" (*OLD*, 281)." The dusty life creates a desire of solace. As a consequence, the only hospitable place is the church.

For long, the church has been the most important institution within the black community in America. As Nick Salvatore rightly explains in *Singing in a Strange Land: C. L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (2005), both culturally and politically, the Church played a significant role in Blacks' emancipation.

It helped blacks survive the dehumanization of slavery by providing an economic and educational uplift after the Civil War, and by serving as major political centers for slave rebellions, civil rights protests, and the mobilization of the black vote. (p. 111).

One of the main features of the Black Church is singing. They sing to praise their Lord; they sing for entertainment, they sing to convey messages as did Harriet Tubman during the Underground Railroad traffic. It has been a place of political meetings through speeches and songs; thus, it has provided leaders and has supported the fight against racism. Many of the black political leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Jessie Jackson and many more were or are still

³ Charles H. Rowell, *This Louisiana Thing That Drives Me: An Interview with Ernest J. Gaines*, in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, p 90.

⁴ John O'Brien, from *Interview with Black Writers*, Ed. John O'Brien. New York: Liveright, 1973. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines* p. 35.



Pastors. It has also been a place of shelter and psychological release to face white oppression. The importance of the church in Blacks' life greatly serves as a fuel for many black writers. In *Of Love and Dust*, for example, Aunt Margaret, Aunt Ca'line and other old black women meet to pray for a safe and secure life in light of Marcus provocative behavior. The Black Church goes along with the Black American experience and heritage. From the Church, they frame a new and common Black identity to face their oppression.

2 – A place of psychological and sexual oppression

Living conditions in the quarters largely depend on skin color. Whether you are white, Cajuns or colored, you are bound to specific rules and regulations. Marshall represents the ruling power in the Plantation, a God-like person who dominates and uses the other groups as instruments of his power. He delegates part of his power to Bonbon, his overseer, who acts accordingly. As such, Bonbon manipulates the workers and uses them to meet his own desires. As such, both black men and women are mistreated or chastised depending on his mood. However, black women are the most victimized people on the plantation. Not only are they used as field laborers, house women, they are also sexual instruments for white men. To satisfy his sexual desire, Bonbon has sex with any black woman he finds on his way, wherever he wants, even in the field, on patches of cane. The narrative describes:

At first he had laid with all and any of them. When his lust was up he had called the one closest to him...and makes her lie down and pull up her dress. Then after he had satisfied his lust he would go back on the horse like nothing had happened. And she would pull down her dress and go back to the work she was doing before he had called her to him.
(*OLD*, 62)

After abusing most of the women under his supervision in the field, Bonbon secretly falls in love with Pauline and they have twin sons. As a white man and owing to the Southern Code, he cannot love her. He has sex with black women but cannot love them. By loving Pauline, he challenges the racist system. Also his act serves to deconstruct this system. But knowing the social boundary between their two races, Bonbon and Pauline accept that they can never marry.

The truth is that the psychological boundary of the quarters also includes Cajuns. Bonbon is just like a tool used to enforce the rules and regulations of the system of which Blacks are the victims. Marshall uses him to achieve his goal and then lets him aside like an orange squeezed of its juice. He tells James Kelly at the end of the novel:

Me and you –what we is? We little people. Geam (James). They make us do what they want us to do and they don't tell us nothing. We don't have nothing to say 'bout it, do we Geam? (*OLD*, 258)

Through Marcus, a microcosm of the treatment undergone by black children in the southern plantations after the Emancipation Proclamation is put forward. Grown-up in Baton Rouge



streets, Marcus experiences hardships that shape his behavior. To save his life, he kills a fellow black boy, Hotwater, in a bar:

A color boy had killed another colored boy at one of the honky-tonk over the weekend (9). "Well, I killed somebody," "Marshall Herbert bond me out...." If he think I'm serving any five years is that plantation he can just haul back and kiss my ass. I'm running 'way from the first chance I get. (*OLD*, 6)

After this murder, Marcus is imprisoned. He comes across strong and evil cellmates that contribute to forge his behavior and make him a rebel who does no longer fear anything. Miss July Rand, Marcus's Grand Mother and also Marshall's former house woman, seeks Marshall's help. Marshall has Marcus release from jail in order to spend his five years of detention on his plantation doing manual labor. Marshall's intention by doing so is to have him perform dirty tasks. He wants Marcus to assassinate Sydney Bonbon who is blackmailing and stealing things from him. Since he used to use Bonbon to kill his debtors or execute unclean tasks. Out of jail, Marcus changes his mind as he confesses to James Kelly:

When they left me out of jail, I promised myself I was go'n look out only for myself; and I was go'n expect no more from life than what I could do for myself. And nobody in this world need to expect no more from me than that. (*OLD*, 253)

Of course, Marcus refuses Marshall's offer to kill Bonbon. He starts blackmailing him pretesting that he will add five more years to his time of detention. Like James Kelly, the narrator, says: "He was the law. He was police, he was judge, he was jury" (*OLD*, 198). Marshall has the power to release or add to Marcus's time of detention. Aware of this, Marcus accepts the offer and is declared innocent of the bar killing. This demonstrates Marshall's influence upon the life of the boy and at a larger extent, upon the lives of the whole non-white community.

Once in the plantation, Marcus finds himself in an environment that is different from his urban one. He therefore refuses to submit to the white and Cajun powers. He distinguishes himself by the flashy clothes he wears and shows his belonging to another world. He cannot accept a code or tradition which considers him as a dehumanized subject, a constructed being, an abject. And the minute he sets foot into the plantation, he comes into conflict with all those who try to make him play that role. Marcus's new position is like being in a semi-open prison. As a convict, he leaves a conventional prison in Bayonne for Marshall's place to serve his detention. In the quarter, he can go to the store, to Josie's to buy food and drink, to Marshall's fields and do other manual works required by Marshall or Bonbon. However, he cannot leave the Plantation and go to town. In such "confinement," he is lawfully killed and has to play Marshall's game. The plantation functions as an open or rather semi-open prison where the workers are limited and controlled by Marshall or Sydney Bonbon, the overseer.

The relationships between the Cajuns and the Blacks as exemplified by Sidney Bonbon and Marcus in the plantation are distinctive traits in the novel. By his position, Bonbon rules over the



whole black community. He deals with it as he would with animals. He must break Marcus and make him yield because the continuation of the system depends on compelling him to abide it. This explains his pressure on the young man by constantly riding his horse behind him. Marcus works under the burning sun and the care of James Kelly, Marshall's black workman. But unable to follow John and Freddie, the other workers, Marcus is given a saddlebag to carry on his shoulder swollen by past days' work.

The field sufferings do not prevent him from enticing women. Marcus' crook act which led him to prison in Bayonne was caused by his enticement of women. In fact, as his hobby, Marcus likes to entice women after hard work. At Marshall's, he starts by Pauline, Bonbon's black girl friend who rejects his offer. Having failed to attract Pauline, he challenges the rule against interracial love by seducing Louise, Sydney's white wife. Their act can be seen as a revenge on Bonbon. Despite Kelly's warning, Marcus plans to leave the plantation with Louise with Marshall's assistance but without knowing Marshall's back idea. At first, Marshall assures him that Bonbon will not be around the time he has chosen to leave with Louise. But, to achieve his plan and get rid of both of them, he brings Bonbon back home at the same time in order to create a climate of jealousy and make both characters kill each other.

Like all white plantation owners, Marshall loves and praises submissive blacks and most of the house servants they address as "good negroes" like Bishop, his house negro. Unluckily, Marcus does not care about the southern hierarchy and the racial segregation rules. Thus, Marshall feels Marcus's disrespect regarding the hierarchy especially, during the last conversation they had about his departure with Louise, witnessed by Bishop. Furthermore, Marcus disgraces Louise, Bonbon's white woman, breaking the law of interracial sex.

As a result, the whole black community is scared of the predictable consequences. The narrator describes the atmosphere of the place the night Marcus prepares to flee with Louise Bonbon from the plantation:

Aunt Ca'line said the whole evening was just too quiet. She said usually it was quiet after everybody had gone back in the field..., but this day was particularly quiet..." Member the time they lynched Coon boy", Pa Bully said... the air smelt just like it did today, the place was quiet just like it was today, and it was clear and bright and hot just like it was today. (*OLD* 263)

Here, the setting is manipulated as a way of arousing the readers' expectations and preparing them for events to come. The quietness of the place foreshadows an unusual and dangerous event that will bring fear to the people. In the end, Bonbon kills Marcus as a self-defense. Bonbon then has to leave the plantation on account of this murder. As for Marshall, he is doubly satisfied as he has gotten rid of Bonbon and has asserted his white supremacy over Marcus who has tried to run away with a white woman.



Marcus is a representation of all southern black boys who suffer the phenomenon of fatherless and motherless status, those boys who have experienced harsh and often cruel treatment and are now forced to end up as drug addicts, rebels or murderers. Consciously or unconsciously, by his attitude, Marcus fights against the plantation system to get things changed and give a meaning to Blacks' life as human beings. Through his behavior, he shows Kelly that an accommodating attitude can never get things better.

Conclusion

Marshall's plantation is a symbol of economic, social and cultural power during Reconstruction time. This period of veiled slavery does not alter the empirical character of the plantation. Marshall manages his plantation focusing on profits. Accordingly, the plantation becomes a place of subjugation for Blacks and Cajuns who are used as instruments of self-satisfaction and resource providers. Whatever the historical time, Gaines' Plantations continue functioning according to their primary pecuniary objectives and basic ruling principles. By its inner organization, the plantation plays a psychological role upon its inhabitants. The divisions of the living areas, the architecture of the houses demonstrate the social condition of the slaves. By its nature, Marshall Plantation expresses the limits of black people. The store, the fields and the cabin testify to their precarious living conditions. Each of the aforementioned places has its own function and plays a specific role in the development of the characters' life and adds to their suffering. In addition to the characters' acts on those places, natural elements contribute to harden Blacks' living conditions. The hot sun and the thick dust are metaphors of the suffering and injustice non-white communities undergo. To face their physical or psychological problems, they turn to God as a rescue. The Church therefore has a cathartic function in so far as it stands for a shelter in times of hardship.

Through Marcus's life, the system of slavery is challenged and destabilized. Marcus fights slavery, submission, racial segregation, social stratification, Southern Code and interracial law by claiming a true emancipation. He also claims more humanism from white community and the abolition of all kinds of racial divisions to make the plantation more attractive. In a final analysis, Marcus triumphs over the heat and Sidney Bonbon. He dies but the myth of interracial love and the fear of Whites are destroyed. Like the other rebels, he symbolizes the psychological destroyer of the plantation system. Through this representation, Gaines demonstrates his status of a committed writer through Blacks' dilemma in Louisiana Plantations as they try to settle and survive through different ways.

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