

A MOTHER'S ROLE IN FACING RACISM

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Seminar: Child/Parent

[Assignment: When you read the stories of Ernest Gaines, you are in contact with a culture which is presumably not much like your own. Nevertheless, the roles of parent and child are still in evidence there. Based on your reading and class discussion of one of the the stories write a paper in which you discuss the role of parent or child as Gaines portrays it.]

(1) In the late 1800's, slavery was abolished in the United States, but the persecution of blacks has continued until present time. Racism is a destructive force that confronts blacks almost every day. As stated in Parents in Contemporary America, "racism has not disappeared from the land and this problem in itself is massive" (111). A young child's first experience with racism can be tragic, and it takes a strong and courageous parent to be able to deal with this subject in the correct manner and to aid his child in understanding the complexities of racism. In Ernest Gaines' story, "The Sky is Gray," James' mother Octavia knew how to do just this. She prepared her son and explained to him in her own way the role that racism and prejudice would have in his life as an adult.

(2) Throughout this story, Octavia performed many acts that many may consider to be cruel or abusive. James was only eight years old, and yet he was expected to act like a "man" and do things that eight year olds that we know would never be expected to do. In this paper, I plan to show the reader some of the reasons and motives behind Octavia's actions and relate these to the ever-present issue of racism and prejudice against blacks in society.

(3) The majority of Gaines' stories took place somewhere around the 1940's. Prejudice was a very prominent factor during that period, especially in the southern states where Gaines' stories were set. The story, "The Sky is Gray," took place in a small town in Louisiana. During the story, Gaines portrayed the white supremacy that existed in Bayonne. Octavia was aware of the so-called black "inferiority," and it was in Bayonne that she began to protect and teach James about what lay ahead in his future.

(4) However, Octavia's instruction began far earlier than this particular trip to town. She had begun to prepare James for the harsh realities of the world early in his life. (In his story, Gaines does not make clear to the reader the age of James. For the purpose of this paper, we will assume that his age at the time of the

story was eight.) Earlier in his life, James' mother had asked him to kill two redbirds that he and his brother had trapped. They were just planning on playing with the small birds, but James' mother insisted that they be killed for food. James refused to kill the redbirds, but his mother continued to yell at him and spank him. She killed the first bird, and with a great deal of protest and tears, James managed to kill the other. Although there was very little meat on the redbirds, Octavia was, in her own way, teaching James an extremely important lesson. James had to learn how to survive by himself and to take the initiative to help his family if his mother was gone.

(5) Octavia also imparted many other small, but very important, lessons to her eldest son. She wanted James to set an example for his younger brothers and sisters, and since his father was not at home, he had to be the man of the house. James was told not to cry because it was not characteristic of a man. His mother said that he had to learn to stand up for himself, by himself. He could not show affection for fear of being weak, he could not be scared, and he was not supposed to show pain or fragility. All of this was to be carried out by an eight year old boy. In an indirect way, James' mother was teaching him to be strong and to be able to endure hardship and pain. She knew that something was going to happen concerning the position of blacks in society. She wanted her son to advance, yet she knew that the black people's position might grow worse before it would become any better.

(6) Many circumstances that had been occurring during that time helped to lead Octavia to her beliefs of a pending change. The incident that was mentioned in Gaines' story convinced her that she was right in preparing her son for this change, also. While James and his mother were sitting in the dentist's office, an argument erupted between a preacher and a college student. The student was questioning the ideals of the preacher and the preacher's passive acceptance of the "fate" of the negro race. The college student felt that every person should question the value of his existence. As he stated, "We should question and question--question everything" (95).

(7) After witnessing this episode, James announced that when he grew up, he wanted to be just like the college student. Octavia had known that she needed to prepare her son for his changing future. The college student had said, "Things are changing because some black men have begun to think with their brains and not their hearts" (102). Octavia had been rearing James to do just that--think with his brain. She wanted him to excel and profit in life, and in order to do that, he had to be a man--even at eight years old. Octavia's concern for her son's future follows the pattern described in Parents in Contemporary America. She exhibited what the authors

refer to as "strong achievement motivation." She wanted her son to fare better in life than she had done, and she was willing to teach him the qualities necessary for him to take part in the upcoming revolution of the black people.

(8) Octavia endured the misunderstanding that James had about the prejudice and discrimination that she suffered. She sat behind the "colored" sign on the bus, she did not enter the "white" cafe for warmth, and she did not complain violently when the dentist sent them away until after the lunch hour. She did not do any of these things because she knew that her son's generation would soon start using their heads. She prepared James to be a part of this, so she did not suffer in vain.

(9) Although Octavia would have been very grateful for an easier life, she had her pride and would not accept anything without working for it first. She would not accept the old woman's offer of food until James had taken her garbage cans to the side of the road, and she would not accept the victory in the fight against discrimination until she had worked to prepare her son for the fight. Octavia suffered and endured many trials for her son, and according to Parents in Contemporary America, "any parent who can rear children successfully under such conditions is indeed a heroic person" (111).