



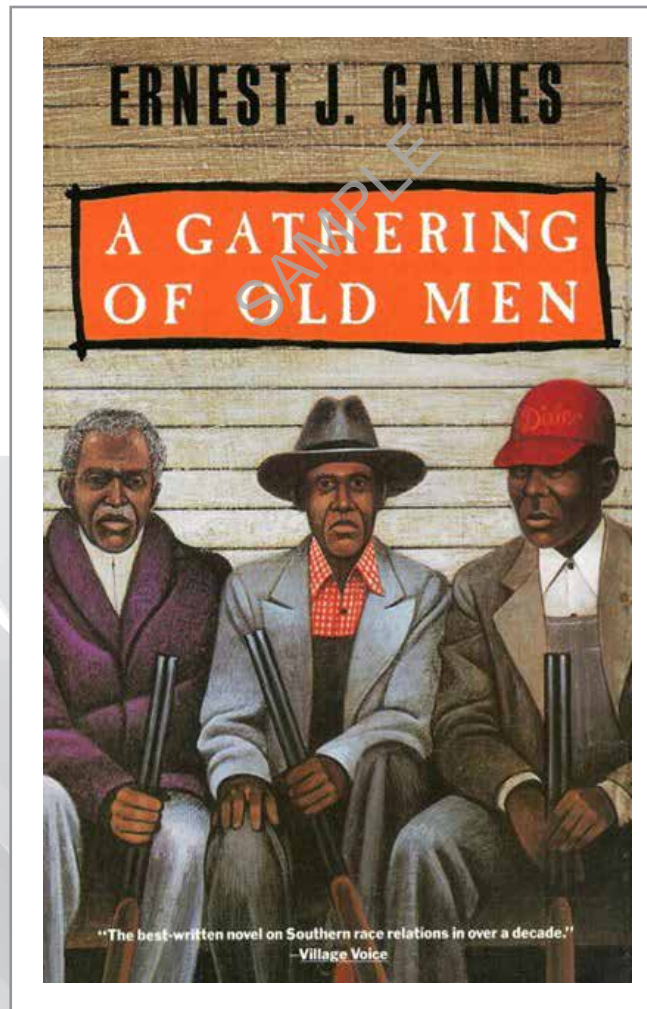
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# **A Gathering of Old Men**

Ernest J. Gaines



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# A Gathering of Old Men

Ernest J. Gaines

## TEACHER GUIDE

SAMPLE  
**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Writing

Compare/contrast, poetry, diary entries, reflection

### Comprehension

Cause/effect, predicting

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, dramatizing, music

### Vocabulary

Target words, definitions, application

### Literary Elements

Characterization, simile, metaphor, setting, theme, plot development

### Thinking

Research, compare/contrast, analysis, critical thinking, current events

### Across the Curriculum

Art—caricatures, sketch

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**Genre:** fiction

**Setting:** Marshall, a Louisiana sugarcane plantation; 1970s

**Themes:** courage, pride, defiance, loyalty

**Conflict:** whites vs. blacks; past vs. present, including conflict over a disappearing way of life (old South vs. new South) and the inner conflict as each old man faces memories of his past humiliation by the plantation landowners

**Style:** traditional folk narrative; a series of narratives employing 15 different narrators, each one picking up where the other left off to tell another part of the story

## Summary

Beau Boutan, a Cajun farmer, lies dead from a shotgun wound. When the sheriff arrives to investigate the apparent murder, he finds 17 or 18 aging Southern black men and Candy, the white heiress of the sugarcane plantation, all confessing to the murder. Although the sheriff is sure he knows who killed Beau, each of the men carries a recently fired shotgun, and no one will retract his confession. Tensions mount as the sheriff attempts to obtain the truth and they all wait uneasily for the arrival of a lynch mob led by Beau's father. In the surprising climax, Charlie, the black man who actually shot Beau, returns from his cowardly escape and confesses. The Boutan clan does not arrive, but a final encounter between the black men and friends of Beau ends in the deaths of one white man and Charlie. Each of the old black men has redeemed his pride through his defiant stand for what he feels is right.

## Background Information

The following information will help students understand references to various terms and incidents in the novel.

**Plantation:** a large land area where workers usually cultivate a single crop. The setting for this novel is a sugarcane plantation. The plantation owners formed the South's elite society. Before the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, most of the Southern plantation workers were slaves, with the women often serving in the houses. Although legally freed in 1865, many of the former slaves remained on the plantations and worked for their housing and low wages. Sharecroppers (laborers who worked for a share of the crop), supplied part of the labor.

**Cajuns:** descendants of French settlers called Acadians, now living primarily in southern Louisiana and Texas. The Acadians were driven from Canada by British troops during the French and Indian War in the 1750s, and many of them settled in the bayou area of southern Louisiana. They lived in relative isolation, maintaining their own individualistic culture and retaining many Acadian French characteristics. Today, most Cajuns speak their own distinct French dialect in addition to English. Although still considered clannish by most outsiders, many of the younger Cajuns do not speak French or follow conventional customs, causing concern among traditionalists that they will lose their cultural heritage. Cajuns are noted for their rich, spicy food and their traditional music, featuring a basic band consisting of fiddles, accordions, and triangles. The majority of Cajuns are Roman Catholics.

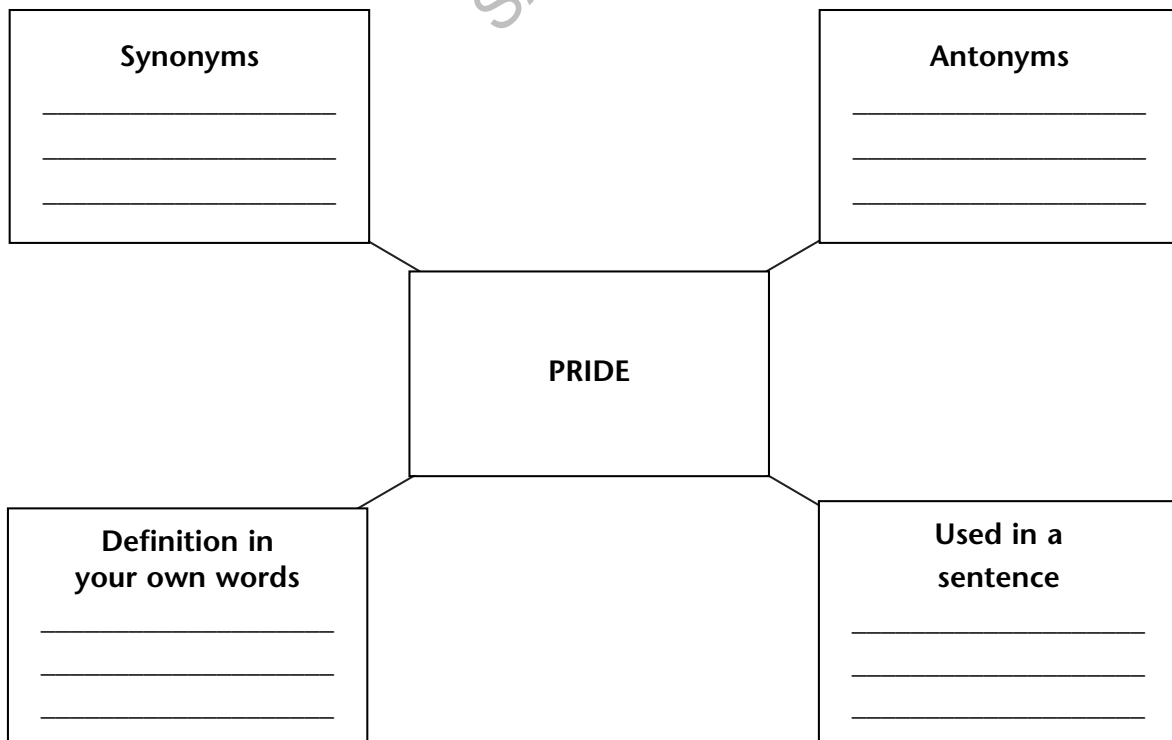
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- Line 3: Taste of the emotion
  - Line 4: Smell of the emotion
  - Line 5: Feeling evoked by the emotion (how it makes you feel)

**Name poem:** Place name vertically on the paper. Write a descriptive word or phrase beginning with the letters of the name.

### Initiating Activities

Use one or more of the following activities to introduce the novel.

1. Present information from the Background Information section of this guide.
2. Read aloud Maya Angelou’s poem, “Caged Bird.” Discuss the plight of the caged bird and tell students they will find many such “caged birds” in *A Gathering of Old Men*. Return to this metaphor after reading the book and discuss.
3. Listen to an audio recording or watch a video of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Ask students whether or not King’s dream has been fulfilled.
4. Bring to class newspaper or magazine articles about racism or the violation of the civil rights of people in America. Discuss racial tensions that still exist in the United States.
5. Using an overhead transparency, have students brainstorm word associations for “pride.”



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## Pages 3-13 (two chapters): Snookum and Janey, narrators

Candy comes to Gram's house and sends Snookum on an urgent mission to call several people to Mathu's house. Snookum gives the message of Beau's death to Janey. Desperate for help, she tries to call Lou and Merle. Merle arrives and her reaction indicates the seriousness of the problem.

### Vocabulary

banister (11)

yonder (11)

drove (11)

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the urgency with which Candy sends Snookum to call for the men to come to Mathu's. *(She is obviously distraught and frightened, telling Snookum to run and not stop running. He must spread the message for the people to come quickly to Mathu's house. Janey must find Lou and Miss Merle and get them there, also. Her urgency is noted in the repetition of her instructions to Snookum. pp. 3-5)*
2. Discuss the obvious differences between Candy and the other characters in this chapter. *(She looks different with light brown hair and blue eyes, is dressed more affluently, and she drives a fancy car. Mathu is black, leading to the conclusion that the other characters in this section are also black. pp. 4-6)*
3. Examine implications of Snookum's message and what he sees at Mathu's. *(It is to Mathu's house the people must gather, so Snookum goes there first. He sees Beau, bloody and lying in the weeds.)*
4. Discuss Janey's desperation and what her narrative reveals about what has happened. *(She becomes frantic and begins to pray for help. She is unable to get either Lou or Merle, the Major is drunk, and Miss Bea is oblivious to the implications of the problem. Miss Merle's arrival and reaction to the news of Beau's death adds to Janey's anxiety. pp. 10-13)*
5. **Prediction:** Who is Fix and why is he coming to the plantation?

### Supplementary Activities

1. Fill in character charts (pages 8-9 of this guide).
2. Present information relating to plantations from the background section.
3. Note the dialect and grammar. Read selected portions aloud and have students contrast the language of different characters.
4. Have a volunteer draw a caricature of Miss Merle based on the simile "She looked like an owl" (p. 12), or have the students create another simile and illustrate it.