

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Gathering of Old Men

by Ernest J. Gaines

written by Darlene Gilmore

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A Gathering of Old Men

Introduction

A Gathering of Old Men is set in an isolated community in New Orleans in the 1970's. It is a story of racial relations between different classes and generations. The story highlights racial tensions that are exacerbated by the murder of a white, Cajun man by a black man.

Beau Boutan is a mean Cajun, whose prominent family has a reputation for being vigilantes. He is murdered by someone in the close-knit community of black people living on part of the sugarcane plantation that his family leases from the wealthy Marshall family. Established patterns of behavior are changed on many levels, as a group of old, black men rally to protect their peer and stand up to the white community for the first time in their lives.

Note to the Teacher: In dealing with the specific adult themes in *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines necessarily uses adult language, including both vulgar language and the word "nigger." There are also some minor graphic descriptions of violence and human suffering in this novel and also some profanity.

All references come from the Vintage Books edition of *A Gathering of Old Men*, copyright 1983.

A Gathering of Old Men

Pre-Reading

This story is set in Bayou country, a small region in Louisiana between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. The inhabitants there maintain their own unique culture that was established when their ancestors came to the region. The dynamics of the relationships between the varying ethnic groups and social classes is complex. Students must become familiar with the culture, history and language of this society to fully understand the story.

The Cajun people of Louisiana originated from Acadians, a group of people driven from Nova Scotia by the British in 1755, at the beginning of the French and Indian war. The word “Cajun” is an American alteration of “Acadian.” They lived in exile in England and France, until the 1763 Treaty of Paris allowed them the opportunity to move to other French areas. Approximately 3,000 people relocated to Southern Louisiana along the Bayous and Mississippi River, which were being opened for settlement. Others from areas such as New York, Halifax, Saint-Domingue (Haiti), and St. Pierre joined them and established a community.

As their community began to thrive, they met with opposition from the existing French-speaking residents, the Creoles. The Creoles wanted to establish themselves as the local aristocracy, as they felt superior to the Acadians, who were descendants of French peasants. This conflict grew and created a social and cultural division. Acadians who became successful, identified themselves as the more aristocratic Creoles. The poor and other European immigrants were thrown in with the Cajun community, first because of their socio-economic background and then through intermarriage. Intermarriage created a large melting pot of skin tones, features, ethnic backgrounds, and economic ranges.

In the early 1900s, the state government mandated compulsory education and English education, creating an effort to eliminate the French language spoken by Cajuns. This served to nearly wipe out Cajun culture and created an association of “Cajun” with poverty and negativity. The U.S. government eventually established a program in the 1960’s to reverse the decline of the Cajun culture. The government created a large, French-speaking region of Southern Louisiana, naming it Acadiana. Since then, Cajun culture has experienced an upswing of growth.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define and use vocabulary words from the novel.
2. compose a character analysis for each of the following:
 - Candy
 - Lou Dimes
 - Mathu
 - Mapes
 - Fix Boutan
 - Gil Boutan
 - Charlie
 - Luke Will
3. compare and contrast Gil's and Fix's personalities, including the symbolism of their characters.
4. identify and discuss examples of symbolism in the novel.
5. discuss the theme of triumphing over adversity as it pertains to the characters in the novel.
6. identify and discuss the stereotypes used in the novel.
7. discuss how prejudice is used in the novel.
8. discuss the author's use of foreshadowing.
9. identify and discuss the conflict of past versus present in the novel.
10. give examples of the author's use of repetition.
11. compare and contrast the characters of Mapes and Griffin.
12. discuss the motif of control through fear and violence.
13. explain the role of education in society.
14. understand the author's use of rising action, climax, and falling action as literary techniques.
15. have a general knowledge of Cajun history and the Bayou region of Louisiana.
16. analyze and provide examples of character motivation.
17. understand the use of first person narration as a literary style.

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Vocabulary Specific to *A Gathering of Old Men*

Bayou – a marshy arm, inlet or outlet of a river or lake

Bonjour – Cajun French greeting, literally translated means “good day”

Cane – sugarcane

Garry – front porch

Gri-Gri – speaking obscurely (African in origin)

Mardi Gras Day – the day before Lent, celebrated in New Orleans as a carnival

Mulatto – the offspring of one white parent and one black parent

Parish – a county

Parrain – godfather, sponsor

Plantation – a large farm or estate in the South, worked by residential laborers

The Quarters – a district of a town largely occupied by a particular group

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the concept of triumph over adversity as it is used in the novel.
2. Discuss the author's use of varying narrators and why none of the main characters narrates the story.
3. Analyze how appearances and stereotypes lead people to make assumptions about others.
4. What is the basis for self esteem? How can self esteem be enhanced or destroyed?
5. Analyze the following characters:
 - Candy
 - Mathu
 - Lou Dimes
 - Mapes
 - Fix
 - Gil
 - Charlie
 - Luke Will
6. Analyze the relationship between Candy and Mathu.
7. What characters in the novel are stereotypes? Explain what the stereotype is for each and why it is used.
8. Discuss the various forms of racism among the social classes depicted in this novel.
9. Discuss how fear and violence are used as a means of control.
10. What part does religion play within each social class, and how do the characters reconcile their use of violence with their religion.
11. What is the common thread among the stories of the old men, and how is it used as the motivation for their actions.
12. Discuss the nature of mob mentality, and how it is used in the novel.
13. Analyze the relationship between Gil and Fix.
14. Analyze the symbolism of the various modes of transportation the characters use.

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George Eliot, Jr. aka Snookum

Vocabulary

switch – a thin, flexible stick used for whipping

1. Why does Candy send Snookum to deliver messages and gather people to Mathu's house?

2. What does Snookum see in Mathu's yard?

3. What else does Snookum notice about the scene?

4. How does Janey treat Snookum?

Thomas Vincent Sullivan aka Sully or T.V.

Vocabulary

avocation – a hobby
gridiron – a football field

1. What is unique about Gil and Cal's relationship?

2. How does the author use the description of Louisiana weather as a metaphor for the LSU vs. Mississippi football game?

3. Why does Gil hurt Cal's feelings after being told about his brother's death?
