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Seen, yet Unknown: The Growth of a Boy in “The Sky is Gray”

The Southern Jim Crow era was a uniquely dark period in American history. Segregation was a facet of the pre-civil rights era that many people are familiar with, but the effects of the racist Jim Crow statutes reached far beyond separated bus seats. Ernest Gaines, having grown up on a Louisiana plantation himself, is able to provide insight to the challenges of the lifestyle narrator James and his mother live in “The Sky is Gray.” However, his ultimate goal as he writes is to present a strong voice that speaks accurately of the person it represents; as such, his stories bring light to the themes of community and manhood alongside the ever-apparent racism of the southern United States (Gates, Jr. and Smith 1101-2). In “The Sky is Gray,” Gaines tells more than just the story of a poor black family attempting to survive the harsh realities of the Jim Crow south. What the eight-year-old narrator, James, encounters throughout his journey teaches him the true meaning of his mother’s pride, explaining all of the lessons she has taught him that he has yet to understand. Through what James sees and hears before and during his journey through the town of Bayonne, Ernest Gaines portrays the development of a boy who is not able to fully understand the world around him into a young man who, after experiencing the world alongside his mother, grasps the concepts of manhood and dignity, taking action to care for his mother and stepping into the role of the man of the house.

James, only eight years old, begins the story seeing the world exactly for what it is, never interjecting or questioning it, and he bases his understanding of adulthood and maturity on what

he sees his mother doing. The very first impression we get of his mother is his blatant statement of her thought process as they wait for the bus. He claims to know that she is worrying about the state of her home, her family, and the hog that they must care for without her supervision (Gaines 1103). He does not consider that she might be concerned about their journey into town or his aching tooth. Any time his mother has left, she has told him to take care of his brother and auntie and watch the hog, so when he leaves with her for the first time, he assumes that she has these same concerns. This also defines his reflective, immature view of manhood at the start of the story. He remarks that when he does all of this stuff while his mother is away, she tells him that “[he’s] the man” (Gaines 1103), showing us that, to him, manhood means doing what his mother tells him to do so she does not have to worry. From here, we learn about his mother’s strict rules against outward affection, showing us that she expects her kids to be resilient and unafraid (Gaines 1101). James, however, thinks nothing of this; though he sees that his mother beats his brother for his fear of ghosts, he never finds her actions cruel. He does not understand why she punishes them for fear, nor does he seek to understand. For now, as a young boy, his mother tells him not to be a crybaby and not to be afraid, and he does not feel the need to question it, showing us his lack of understanding of what being a man really means.

We can also see the immaturity of his point of view and perception as he and his mother ride the bus to Bayonne. When he catches sight of the young girl in the red coat, he decides that she thinks too highly of herself to blow her nose, and when she does not smile back at him, he decides that he should turn his nose back at her, too (Gaines 1108). He determines who the girl is after a few moments watching her on the bus, proving his initial immaturity; he thinks he knows who she is without her speaking to him, and like any child, he makes up his mind about her based on what he knows from his world. This moment also shows his misunderstanding of the

things he sees. He determines after seeing this girl on the bus that he loves her, never explaining why (Gaines 1108); he simply sees her, and she sees him too. He does not understand what love for another person consists of, nor does he know anything about this girl, but after sharing glances with her, he has fallen for her, showing his shallow understanding of love. Because of this, we look back at his love for his mother, understanding that it has not fully developed. He loves her, but he has not found a way to articulate it; he only admonishes that he cannot hug her because she sees affection as weakness (Gaines 1102). He has not yet developed an understanding of her love and has yet to become the man she wants him to be.

Because of his inability to understand what he sees, James has to rely on what he is told to comprehend the world around him. However, what he hears the people around him say combines with the prevalent silence and absence of explanation from his mother to define his understanding of manhood and shape it as he ventures to Bayonne. James' point of view offers a striking view of his mother, allowing us to only learn about her through his memories of her infrequent words and her striking silences. In her article on language, interaction, and manhood in "The Sky is Gray," Mary Ellen Doyle discusses the sparse use of dialogue throughout the story, arguing that his mother's short speech teaches him how to act and how the world truly is. She writes that Octavia's silence "reflects the severity of life as [she] sees it, responds to it, and teaches him to respond" (Doyle). We can see this established from the very beginning, when James recants that his mother "don't like for you to say something just for nothing" (Gaines 1106). She has taught him that speaking is worthless when the words said accomplish nothing, and hearing her silence as they wait for the bus, he decides not to speak as well. Octavia, here, is demonstrating her image of strength, and James is recollecting these ideals of strength that she has taught him. However, he is simply observing and mirroring his mother, not yet

comprehending why. She does not explain to him what she wants him to learn, and he cannot yet understand what is not said to him, so the meaning and benefit of her silence is presently lost on him. We further see this when Octavia beats James for not killing the redbird. She does not once explain why he must kill the bird; she simply resorts to punishment, leaving him to question why she expects him to do this horrible thing. He does not understand that he must learn how to care for himself and his family until his auntie tells him (Gaines 1107). This is the first instance of James understanding what his mother is trying to teach him; through hearing someone else speak to him while his mother remains silent, he begins to learn what his mother is trying to teach him about manhood, though he does not yet see it on his own.

The events that James witnesses at the dentist's office are perhaps the biggest influence on James' development to manhood. Many of the things we have learned about his mother culminate in this scene, and as he watches the people around him interact with him, his mother, and each other, he begins to develop a new understanding of manhood. We listen through James' ears as the "preacher" – dubbed as such by James – and the college student argue about the inaction of blacks in America. James does not interject into their discussion, offering no opinion on what the men say, and even later admitting that he does not understand what the student means when he debates the meaning of colors and words with the lady (Gaines 1113). Yet, though he does not reflect directly on their argument, we see his mindset begin to shift because of what he heard the young college student say. The next time James looks at Octavia after the argument, he relates again that he loves her, but this time he does not admonish that she will not allow him to reach out and hug her. He now daydreams of working in the cotton fields to earn money and buy her a new red coat, prettier than any old black coat (Gaines 1112). He has gone from wistfully observing the world and languishing his feelings to dreaming of taking action for

her. He has watched as the pastor, a passive figure who is content to sit back in silence and let God work, collides with a young college student who has taken action, pushing aside raw emotion and heart by questioning the world and inciting thought and change. James wants to be like that student (Gaines 1112); he wants to take action just as that student does. This is his first big step into a true understanding of manhood; he is dreaming of taking action to care for his family, just as a man should.

As James and Octavia leave the dentist's office and enter the cold outdoors, James further develops an understanding of manhood and finally embraces his role as the man of the house. As he sees his mother's sadness and hunger, he takes on the silence that she has taught him to take care of her. He embraces his newfound sense of action as he eats the cakes she gave up their bus fare for, noting his mother's sadness and swearing to "make all this up" to her in the future (Gaines 1118). He has decided to someday take care of his mother. He will not sit around and hope that God will save his mother, nor will he wait for his father to return home and fix the unhappiness that has resulted from his absence. He is now beginning to mentally take on the role of his father, stepping up and hoping to someday be able to take the action needed to care for his family as the man of the house is expected to. He finally gets the chance to exercise his budding sense of manhood as they are asked by the old lady on the street to sit inside and eat. James realizes that the woman has lied to him and his mother about the chore he needed to do so she would accept the food and warmth, and immediately, James intends to look into the trash can [and confirm that it is empty], thinking that he "ain't go'n be nobody's fool" (Gaines 1121). He begins to follow in the ideal that his mother taught him, interpreting the woman's twisted kindness as a trick to belittle and demean him; yet, when the woman catches him, he simply turns back and follows her inside, never going back to see for himself that the trash is empty, nor

telling his mother that the woman has deceived him. Though it would be easy to ignore this moment, it is important to realize that he has made a deliberate decision not to share this with his mother. The old lady has attacked his pride, which, as his mother has shown him, is a great offense he should avoid. He knows, though, that she will leave if she finds out that they are being tricked into taking charity from someone else, so he hides the truth from her, taking into account her needs and approaching, for the first time, the role of a caretaker while still maintaining his mother's dignity. Though Octavia does not realize it, James now understands her sense of pride. He has learned through watching her hesitate to share where she lived with the lady at the dentist and turn down what seemed like free food that she does not want to appear poor or needy to others. Through observing, he has approached manhood, having learned from everything he has seen and heard what dignity means to his mother and what he must do to preserve that while still caring for her. In this moment, he has truly become a young man, embracing the lessons he has learned by observing his mother and the challenges she faces in Bayonne side-by-side.

Critics often see James' journey as an induction to white America, noting his separation from the segregated town prior to his journey to have his tooth pulled. They often argue that James sees this divide as he enters the segregated bus and watches the white schoolchildren play, pointing to these moments to prove that throughout the story, he is learning from his mother how to survive as an unfeeling black man in white America. William Meyer, in his article on the hypervisuality of "The Sky is Gray," similarly argues that James is experiencing a sensory awakening at the crossroads of black and white culture. He claims, "James must learn to balance the words of his black heritage with the visions of white America—must learn to observe his mother's sadness and poverty while at the same time controlling his words after the fashion of the stoic adult black male..." (Meyer). Here, he is arguing that James' struggles and his mother's

harsh teaching in the story are representative of a greater conflict to discover his place as a black man who can take on the dangers of white America.

We cannot deny that James is seeing race throughout this story. Ernest Gaines devoted himself to sharing the stories of people along plantations in Louisiana, seeking to always “know the place” to “know the people” (Gates, Jr. and Smith 1102). “The Sky is Gray” was written in 1963, two years before Jim Crow was repealed, placing our story in the heart of a segregated city that is built to disadvantage them. As James journeys through the city of Bayonne, he is learning the consequences of racial segregation as he watches white people through the windows of warm restaurants his mother will not let him approach. One of the first problems James encounters in this story is finding a seat on a segregated bus, as he cannot take the multiple available seats in the “White” section; further, he and his mother would not have had to search for a black restaurant to stay warm in. For the first time, race does not just define where people sit on the bus. It defines whether he can eat and be warm. We can see through James’ perspective that he is aware of the basic divide between blacks and whites in Bayonne, and we watch as he sees white people take the comfort he so desperately desires as he suffers in the cold. It is also clear that James’ family would not be so desperately poor if not for their race. We watch as James overhears Monsieur Bayonne discussion with auntie about the lack of funds the family has received from the father in the army, when we can only assume that white families would receive compensation for a family member’s service. James hears and sees racism and racial divide at nearly every corner, building a case for Meyer’s argument that James is learning how to act as a black man in this new white society.

What Meyer seems to miss, however, is how James shows us his personal growth as he takes in his mother’s actions and inactions and begins to form a deeper understanding of

maturity. Certainly, much of what affects James and Octavia results from a racially divided society; nonetheless, arguing that he is learning to become a stereotypical black man ignores the complex nature of the pride Octavia seeks to teach her son. David Kippen, who debates strictly race-based readings of “The Sky is Gray” in his article, argues along this same line. He claims that critics need to look at “the quality of the characters' thoughts and actions, regarding the characters not as caricatures of different types, but as fully formed people with their own—to borrow a phrase from Joyce—'individuating rhythms’” to understand the complex motivations at play (Kippen). Kippen posits the deep humanity of these characters, encouraging readers to recognize the intersectionality of their situations and encouraging readers and critics alike to seek the complexity in Octavia’s actions that lies beyond the ideals of race. Though James sees segregation work against him, potentially for the first time, as he hears the lady in the dentist’s waiting room say that they are “the wrong color” and he watches white people eat in comfort while he freezes in the cold (Gaines 1114), he also watches his mother walk away from a colored café that they are invited to stay in so she does not appear needy. He is hearing her silence when the lady in the waiting room asks her where she is from so that nobody will know that she comes from the fields. As he watches her turn away other people’s kindness, he is learning that his mother stays silent and avoids charity from others to maintain her pride, not simply to survive the racist structures put in place against her. His mother does not attempt teach him how to be a black man alone; she intends for him to learn how to stand strong on his own without the philanthropy of anyone he may encounter.

Ernest Gaines relates the entirety of “The Sky is Gray” through the limited scope of an eight-year-old’s point of view, leaving readers with only James’ observations to guide them through his own growth into manhood. Because of this unique point of view, we get to witness a



transformation in the way James perceives the world, watching as the things he has seen and heard throughout his life meld with what he takes in on his one-day adventure through the town of Bayonne. His perspective allows us to view Octavia in a more sympathetic light, seeing how desperately she cares for her son while still trying to show him how to be strong and become a man. To view James' growth into manhood as a racial allegory alone would discredit the incredible care Gaines put into developing the voice of a boy who seeks to care for his mother, whose pride is greater to her than her need for comfort and negate the depth of James' emotional maturity. Though we should never ignore the horrors of racism or erase them from our history, we must acknowledge that the people affected by it were deeply human, facing many different challenges and taking action based on multiple complex motivations. Through James' brilliantly-developed voice and his journey into manhood, Gaines attempts to show readers a more sympathetic view of the people in the Jim Crow south, encouraging us to know them more intimately and challenge our understanding of them. James' rite of passage into manhood gives us that chance; we get to see how his mother toils to ensure that he is cared for without giving up the pride and self-sufficiency that matters so much to her, never once acting out of malice to her son. Gaines encourages us through James' eyes to see love in his journey of growth.

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