



Black History BW

Subject: English Language Arts

State: Tennessee

Student Name: _____

Teacher Name: _____

School Name: _____

In this speech, Ernest Gaines explains his obsession with a small piece of land. Read the speech. Then, answer the questions.

An Obsession

by Ernest Gaines

¹ An obsession of mine concerns a half-acre of land in south-central Louisiana. This plot of land is surrounded by sugarcane fields on all sides, some of the rows coming within twenty feet of it. This plot of land is where my ancestors have been buried the past hundred years, where most of the people I knew as a child are now buried. This is Riverlake plantation, Point Coupee Parish, Oscar, Louisiana.

² The first fifteen-and-a-half years of my life were spent on this place. My ancestors for over a hundred years planted the sugarcane here, hoed the sugarcane, plowed it, cut it and, when it was time, hauled it to the mills. They, like too many others who worked this land, are buried here in unmarked graves because they could not afford the headstones.

³ A hundred years ago, the land was owned by one man who designated that the land would be a cemetery for the people on that plantation, but he did not give it to them, nor would he let them buy it. Today the land is owned by sixteen people who live all over the country and probably different parts of the world, some of whom I'm sure have never visited the plantation or know anything about the cemetery which lies there. Yet it is their land, and those who are buried there do not own even six feet of the ground.

⁴ Many rural cemeteries have been destroyed all over this country, and day and night I worry that the same fate may happen to this one. There is no law in the state of Louisiana that I am aware of that says it cannot be done. My wife and I and several friends from my childhood are trying to find a way to get control of the land. We have contacted lawyers to work with us and presently we are keeping the place clean of overgrowth, because that is one excuse landowners and developers use to plow under cemeteries. "We didn't know that one was there."

⁵ At a recent interview, I was asked where would I like to be buried and I answered that I'd like to be in the same place where my ancestors are. The interviewer asked me what would I like on my headstone and I said, "To lie with those who have no marks." These are the people for whom I wrote letters as a child, read their letters because many of them could not read nor could they write. Many of them had to go into the fields before they had a chance to go to school. Yet they're the ones responsible for my being here tonight. Not only did they encourage me to stay in school, but they, and only they, have been the source of all of my writings. I've said many times before that my novels, my short stories, are just continuations of the letters that I started writing for them some fifty years ago, and since I've tried to say something about their lives on paper – their joy, their sorrows, their love, their fears, their pride, their compassion—I think it is only my duty now to do as much as I can to see that they lie in peace forever.

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- 1 Based on paragraph 5, which of the following **best** describes how the author feels about his ancestors?
- (A) He feels ashamed of them.
 - (B) He feels indebted to them.
 - (C) He is jealous of them.
 - (D) He is in awe of them.

- 2 Based on paragraph 5, what is the main goal of the author's novels and short stories?
- (A) to be entertaining to modern readers
 - (B) to provide his ancestors with a voice
 - (C) to provide insight into the geography of the area
 - (D) to make money from the experiences of his ancestors

3 Which of the following sentences **best** shows that the passage is a speech?

(A) “The first fifteen-and-a-half years of my life were spent on this place.”

(B) “My wife and I and several friends from my childhood are trying to find a way to get control of the land.”

(C) “Many of them had to go into the fields before they had a chance to go to school.”

(D) “Yet they’re the ones responsible for my being here tonight.”