"The Common Humanity That is in Us All": Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

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Abstract

From his earliest works to his most recent novel, *A Lesson before Dying*, the afro–American writer, Ernest Gaines consistently writes about people who face the problems of being denied humanity, dignity and self–worth. In *A Lesson before Dying*, Gaines picks up this theme as the narrator of the story, Grant Wiggins, takes on the responsibility of convincing Jefferson, a non-educated labourer who has been sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit, that he is a "man" and not a hog as his white attorney declared. The paper illustrates one man's struggle to gain recognition of his humanity and how this recognition will initiate a change in the community.

Explicit in the canon of the Afro–American writer Ernest J. Gaines (1933) is the author's concern with the fight for self–worth, human dignity and personal integrity which are prerequisites for establishing one's humanity. In his world, a character can either look away or accept the status of a victim or he/she can make an active decision and thus alter history. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) is about more than the challenges associated with being black in an Eurocentric society. Though Gaines positions the story within the context of the African American experience, its central theme investigates what it means to be human.

The novel, like all of Gaines's fiction, is set in rural Southern Louisiana. It is the story of two young African Americans: Jefferson, an unsophisticated man sentenced to be executed for a murder he did not commit and Grant Wiggins, the novel's narrator, an educated college teacher in the rustic plantation school. Both are struggling to define what it is to be a man in a society that perceives them as less than "human". With the help of Grant, Jefferson has to assert the value of his life by confronting death in a society where his life counts for nothing. His death must accomplish what his life could not, i.e. his humanity. In Gaines's works, death, specifically that of black heroes is the "passport of humanity." [1]

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson's life appears as the metaphor of blacks whose existence has been made worthless or purposeless by the whites in the United States. Throughout history, facts such as slavery and racism have definitely debased blacks' lives. Those people's lives have been deprived of humanity, dignity and honour, and Jefferson's is a case in point. For whites, blacks should always be blamed whether they are guilty or not. Jefferson did not commit the crime he is accused of. He simply attended the shooting that took place between Alcee Grope, the white storekeeper, and two young blacks, Brother and Bear. Both died out of shooting and Jefferson was found on the premise. On that only account, he has to be executed. He has to pay for the death of the whiteman. The death sentence is not pronounced against Jefferson because he is guilty of murder. But he has to die because of his skin color. Being black, Jefferson does not belong to the right race and perhaps he is not "human" enough as white people would think. Guilt or innocence is secondary to racial designation privileging the whiteness regardless of how it works with no place for black humanity. He is racially victimized. Keith Byerman states that "he [Jefferson] is the emblem of a racial formation and social practice that makes the African American guilty by definition." [2]

In an attempt to help Jefferson, his white lawyer bases his defense on the argument that Jefferson is not to be held responsible for the charges because his intelligence parallels that of a "hog". While the lawyer's intent to mitigate Jefferson's punishment may be noble, he effectively stripes him of his humanity:

> **Gentlemen of the jury, look at him … look at this … I implore, look carefully – do you see a man sitting here? Look at the shape of his skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand – look deeply into his eyes . Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder , a robbery,… can plan anything? ... What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow , a thing to load your bales of cotton , a thing to dig your ditches ,to chop your wood , to pull your corn … Gentlemen of the jury, this man planned a robbery? Oh, pardon me, pardon me, I surely did not mean to insult your intelligence by saying 'man' – would you please forgive me for committing such an error? … Look at her [his godmother] … Take this**

> **away from her , and she has no reason go on living. We may see him as not too much, but he's her reason for existence… He is innocent of all charges brought against him . But let us say he was not… What justice would there be to take this life? Justice gentlemen ? Why , I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this. [3]**

The inability to "plan" is a defect in the character's mental capability, denying him the intellectual trait peculiar to humans. It presumes the black physical superiority over mental abilities assuming a bestial nature to Jefferson rather than a human one. Gaines's interest centres less on the injustice done to Jefferson than on the restoration of his human dignity. What the lawyer said of Jefferson in the court is the product of society. Being a "hog" means "an ignorant, sloppy, unreflecting animal"[4] reinforced by another depiction of his lawyer as a "fool", and "a thing that acts on command" (*LBD,*7). It is the result of the process of "animalization" conditioned by the way of life imposed on blacks by the white society. Evidence in the novel is Jefferson's life as he laments:**

> **Whoever car'd my cross. Mr. Wiggins? My mama? My daddy? They dropped me when I wasn't nothing. Still**
>
> **don't know where they at this minute. I went in the field when I was six, driving that old watercart. I done pulled that cotton sack, I done cut cane , load cane, swung that ax, chop ditch banks. Since I was six. (*LBD*, 229)**

Like all of his like, Jefferson is an unfortunate young black. He is both fatherless and motherless. The only person who is supposed to be close to him is Miss Emma, his godmother. This parental deprivation is surely a source of tremendous social and psychological handicap for him. Generally, loving relationships are likely to enhance the significance of one's life. Instead of loving relationships, Jefferson's life is filled with boredom, oppression, and frustration that render his life "inhuman" and meaningless. The emotional deprivation he has suffered from as a consequence of his parents' absence has made him lose all self–respect. It reinforces his sense of nothingness and deprives him of the emotional strength he needs to help him build his humanity.

As he later writes in his diary: "[N]obody aint never been that good to me an make me think im somebody." (*LBD*,232)

Besides, Jefferson is a victim of ill treatments and social iniquities due to his race. Being a little child does not preclude Jefferson from hardwork in which black adults are forced. He undergoes the same conditions as black adults. He works in fields, chopping woods, etc. as the other and older blacks. Furthermore, the education Jefferson is entitled to is not adequate. It is limited, superficial, and inappropriate. Grant Wiggins, the young black teacher, is always complaining about the restrictive education that he finds vain and useless for blacks. Thus, Jefferson's life, like that of every young black man, is predestined. Jefferson does not have any other choice than "to die violently" or "to be brought down to the level of beasts" or "to run and run" (*LBD*,62). Grant Wiggins holds this argument from Matthew Antoine, an old teacher, who emphasizes the endless cycle of dehumanization that awaits blacks. He provides a negative model for Grant and the black community in enhancing the sense of belonging and encouraging his students to flee.[5] Hence Grant's deep distaste of Louisiana plantation quarter is apparent in his depiction of it as a passive victim of social and economic oppression, a community suffocated by the burden of spiritual stagnation and approval of conventionality.[6] Therefore, Jefferson seems to have no will of his own and appears to have been completely submitted to the society's relegation of him as an animal. When he is sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit, he answers his verdict with silence. In the course of the novel, however, he learns to find his voice and thus has an important impact not only on his own teacher, Grant, but on the whole community.

Grant's initial visits to jail with Miss Emma show how much Jefferson has internalized society's definition of him as a "hog". He refuses to eat the food that is brought to him by his godmother and demands corn instead because, as he says, "[t]hat's what hogs eat." (*LBD*,82). The power of language to define identity is not only revealed by Jefferson's acceptance of the animal – like status, but also by his perceived difference from both his teacher and his godmother: "Y'all youmans [i.e. humans], …I'm a hog " (*LBD*,83). His statement "I aint no youman" (*LBD*,139) signals both the repudiation of his own humanity as well as the chasm that he feels exist between him and "you", that is Grant and the others who visit him. His behaviour corresponds to his self- image:

> **'I'm go'n show you how a old hog eat' , he said, He knelt down on the floor and put his head inside the bag [of food] and started eating,without using his hands.He even sounded like a hog. (*LBD*, 83)**

Jefferson plays the role that has been imposed on him. He adopts an animal identity for his human identity has been destroyed. It is this dehumanization that is perceived through his ways and attitudes. Miss Emma, his godmother, is seriously hurt by his situation that she considers as an offence. It is humiliating and unacceptable. Her protest is her voice "I don't want them to kill no hog … I want a man to go to that chair on his own feet" (*LBD*,13). What Miss Emma pleads for is not to save Jefferson's life. This is a lost case. Her concern is rather to make Jefferson meet his fate like a man and die with dignity. For that purpose, Miss Emma commits Grant Wiggins to make Jefferson restore his own humanity and teach him how to be a man.

This mission is not an easy one. Grant's task is, as Philip Auger says, "the problem of redefining Jefferson from his identity given to him by the white dominant culture, a hog, to a new identity, man."[7] During the first months, Grant fails to initiate any improvement because he is still too cynical and too much preoccupied with himself. He does not have any idea how to influence and change a man who has been sentenced to death: "Do I know what a man is? Do I know how a man is supposed to die? I'm still trying to find out how a man should live. Am I supposed to tell someone how to die who has never lived" (*LBD*,31). Jefferson senses that Grant has not voluntarily assumed the role of a teacher to him. As Suzanne Jones remarks:

> **Grant's first sessions with Jefferson have no effect. Grant's pedagogical techniques include modeling polite behavior for Jefferson, trying to make Jefferson feel guilty for hurting his godmother's feelings and exploiting the bad relations with whites by telling Jefferson that they are betting against Grant's**

> **project with him. At first Grant fails with Jefferson for the same reason he is failing with his elementary school students. He does not want to teach, he is cynical about the prospect of making a difference , and thus he is angry about being forced into such a position.[8]**

Grant is a man in his late twenties. He hates his career as a teacher in his poor community. He even performs his job without any enthusiasm or idealism because he feels powerless to improve his students' perspectives, although he is supposed to make his class "responsible young men and young ladies" (*LBD*,39), or modify his situation but is near to be convinced of his former teacher's advice "just do the best you can. But it won't matter" (*LBD*,66) because the situation "will make you the nigger you were born to be" (*LBD*,65) providing a reason for his initial protest of being unable to change what 21 years have done to Jefferson and his like. Grant, as Gaines says, "hates teaching. He hates the South. He hates everything around him."[9] Grant's words explain his frustration:

> **I teach, but I don't like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated blackman can do in the South today. I don't like it; I hate it. I don't like even living here. I want to run away … (*LBD*, 191)**

Grant finds his own freedom extremely limited if it indeed exists. He even feels that his role as a teacher bears no promise of producing change, human dignity and self–worth. He sees the future of his students to be lacking in any promise of advancement:

> **And I thought to myself. What am I doing? Am I reaching them at all? They [his students] are acting as the old men**

did earlier . They are fifty years younger, may be more, but doing the same thing those old men did who never attended school a day in their lives? Is it just a vicious cycle? Am I doing anything? (*LBD*, 62)

At first Grant is unwilling to truly commit himself to his mission as he puts his individual interests and wounds ahead of the community's needs. He complains about the fact that visiting Jefferson in jail entails being humiliated by asking the white racist policemen for permission to see him. He is aware of the pleasure they take in making blacks feel degraded. One of the visits to gain approval for meeting Jefferson costs Grant entering Pichot's house, the owner of the Plantation, through the backdoor – the kitchen's door, waiting and standing for two and a half hours. Besides, he must humbly say "Yes, sir" and must not appear smarter than the white man. Yet, he maintains his pride and dignity by refusing to sit or eat any of Pichot's food. Though Grant feels detached, he submits because he realizes that his community needs his effort without believing in its full efficiency. Grant's submission feeds him with a bond to the past and a sense of rootedness which may not be available to him elsewhere.

Giving in to the pressures of both his aunt, Tante Lou, and Miss Emma, Grant with hesitation sets his task in regular visits to Jefferson in jail. Tante Lou and Miss Emma represent the old generation who are assumed to affect the destinies of the young generation by preserving the mutual respect among them and changing the young's perception of themselves as degraded members to dignified ones in their society. Hence, one of the significant lessons that he imparts to Jefferson is the latter's conviction of his humanity and his manliness, to stand up and walk like a man. Therefore, Grant has to help rebuild Jefferson's self–esteem on two fronts. On the one hand he has to convince him that the white construction of black manhood is a "myth" that must be deconstructed:

A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they're better than anyone else on earth – and

> **that's a myth. The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth … As long as none of us stand, they're safe. They're safe with me … I don't want them to feel safe with you anymore (*LBD*, 192)**

Grant tries to impart to Jefferson the knowledge of the social construction of black manhood and encourages Jefferson to "chip away at that myth by standing" (*LBD*,192). One of the white advocates of that myth is Sheriff Guidry who admits with no respect that African Americans are "only three–fifths human" (*LBD*,192). Dr. Joseph Morgan, the white superintendent of schools enriches the myth by mispronouncing Grant's name Higgins instead of Wiggins despite the latter's correction. He shows, like the other white folk, his superiority in using standard English as a form of language peculiar to him/them only.

On the other hand, Grant has to work against Jefferson's marginalization within his own community: the life long neglect and lack of respect he has suffered from as a result of his parent's absence. In a way Grant can also be seen as complicit in Jefferson's dilemma. In his selfishness and rejection of communal needs and belief systems, such as religion, as well as in his cynicism about his job as a teacher, Grant has compromised his social responsibility as a role model and has thereby severed the bond that ties together the members in a community. As Jeffrey Folks explains:

> **It is a refusal to take seriously the belief system of the time and place in which he lives , and inevitably his skepticism becomes a corrupting model for others. In a sense, Grant is responsible for Jefferson's presence during the murder of a liquor owner, and for the other youths who murder. Once**

> **the binding of shared values is severed , discrete acts of irresponsibility and violence occur with increasing frequency.[10]**

In this regard, Grant needs to become aware of his own responsibility to Jefferson. By accepting his role as a teacher, however, Grant proves to Jefferson the community's interest in him, thus making Jefferson see that he is a vital part of the community ;hence, enhancing his human identity. As a consequence of the communal affirmation Jefferson receives when people visit him in jail, he comprehends the significance of his role and of preserving his dignity for the community's good. Grant attempts to convince Jefferson that he has the potential to influence others, even make others happy and proud. He explains to Jefferson that he needs to become a "hero" whom he defines as someone who "does for others. He would do anything for people he loves because he knows it would make their lives better." (*LBD*,191) Grant starts by telling him "To them, You're nothing but another nigger – no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong" (*LBD*,191) and continues: "teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Nothing else – nothing about dignity, nothing about identity, nothing about loving and caring. They never thought we were capable of learning these things." (*LBD*,192) By behaving like a man and mounting enough courage to face death nobly, Jefferson could, as Grant argues, debunk the white myth of black inhumanity:

> **The white people out there are saying that you don't have it – that you're a hog, not a man. But I know they are wrong. You have the potentials. We all have, no matter who we are. (*LBD*, 191)**

By standing like a man Jefferson would, thus, refute the basis for black subjugation "They would no longer have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in …" (*LBD*,192). Even though Grant is a victim of the environment as much as Jefferson, he believes that "it is up to Jefferson" to halt the "vicious circle" of victimization. Jefferson can do this if he realizes his status as a human being. Jefferson's mandate from Grant, to die with dignity, is a monumental request and as he contemplates the weight of the task,

he declares the overwhelming burden of the challenge, using the biblical analogy of Jesus on the cross to underscore his point:

> **Me, Mr. Wiggins. Me to take the cross. Your cross, nannans cross, my own cross. Me, Mr. Wiggins. This old stumbling nigger. Y'all axe a lot, Mr. Wiggins (*LBD*, 224)**

For Jefferson's death to have meaning, he has to "stand" and challenge the Southern code that debases blacks' humanity. Thus Jefferson's responsibility towards his community becomes heavier than the plight of his circumstances. But Jefferson's individual heroism not only restores Grant's faith and gives the dying Miss Emma someone "to be proud of" but it elevates the community beyond its "broken men."

As a consequence of their regular meetings in jail, the roles between the two men are gradually reversed and Grant becomes Jefferson's student. By trying to make a man out of him and by subsequently observing the growth and change in Jefferson, Grant is able to see the parallel to the history of his people and how they have endured constant denigration but still retained their dignity. In this sense, Jefferson stands representative of all black people whose humanity was deformed by enslavement, but who have not given up in despair but rather have consistently struggled to keep their dignity. Witnessing the transformation of Jefferson leads Grant to a thorough self–examination and ultimately causes a profound change in himself:

> **You're more a man than I am, Jefferson … My eyes were closed before this moment, Jefferson. My eyes have been closed all my life. Yes, we all need you. Every last one of us. (*LBD*, 225)**

From this moment on, Grant's former exasperation with his people, what he had previously interpreted as subservience and conformity, is now seen as a survival mechanism that is based on strength and endurance. Grant Wiggins comes to a more profound understanding not only of the community's history of survival but also of himself which includes the reawakening of the dormant pride in his people that had only slumbered beneath his preoccupation with himself. Since Jefferson ultimately maintains his dignity and refuses to

succumb to despair, Grant finally becomes aware of his own weakness which prevents him from standing by Jefferson in his final hours:

> **I'm not with you at this moment because – because I would not have been able to stand. I would not have been able to walk with you those last few steps. I would have embarrassed you. (*LBD*, 249)**

Grant's maturation is also completed by a modification of his attitude concerning religious matters. As a reluctant son of the South, Grant initially resents Reverend Mose Ambrose, the minister who was committed to save Jefferson's soul, for trying to convince him that God is to help Jefferson in his plight. Whereas Miss Emma insists on the religious component of Jefferson's teaching, Grant first regards the minister as a representative of an outdated mode of belief, one who can only quote Bible verses when faced with problems but who cannot influence the present in any way. When Grant accuses him of telling only lies from the Bible in order to soothe the people's hearts and to comfort them with promises about a better future in Heaven, the minister replies:

> **Yes, you know. You know, all right. That's why you look down on me, because you know I lie. At wakes, at funerals, at weddings – Yes, I lie. I lie at wakes and funerals to relieve pain. ' Cause reading, writing, and 'rithmetic is not enough … She been lying everyday of her life, your aunt in there. That's how you got through that university, cheating herself here, cheating herself there, but always telling you she's allright. I've seen her hands bleed from picking cotton. I've seen blisters from the hoe and the cane knife. At that church, crying on her knees. You ever looked at the scabs on her knees, boy? Course you never. 'Cause she never wanted you to see it. And that's the difference between me and you, boy; that make me the educated one, and you the gump. I know my people. I know what they**

> **gone through. I know they done cheated themself, lied to themself – hoping that one they all love and trust can come back and help relieve the pain. (*LBD*, 218)**

By calling the supposedly educated Grant "boy", Mose Ambrose indicates that knowledge of facts alone does not suffice to make one a man. Rather, matters of the heart must not be neglected in favour of things concerning the head. It is only the knowledge of one's people, of their daily toil and their secret hopes and wishes that give one the power to influence others. Grant may be educated, but he will not reach his people by tending to the minds alone. He has to learn how to take care of the hearts. Later Grant seems to understand the significance of religion for the wellspring of the community as his following remark attests:

> **They must believe, if only to free the mind, if not the body. Only when the mind is free has the body a chance to be free. Yes, they must believe, they must believe.**
> **Because I know what it means to be a slave. I'm a slave. (*LBD*, 251)**

Grant may never become a believer himself, but he comes to accept "the value of belief" and "the role of religion as a collective narrative of hope within a traditional community."[11] Religion confers goodness, signifies decency and keeps one grounded. It serves as a sustaining force in creating and maintaining one's human identity. Lee Papa states:

> **Gaines and his characters are creating a new text of religiosity that stands as an opposite pole from traditional Christianity …Gaines's new text expresses the divinity of the people and the Earth , not just of God and heaven.[12]**

What then initially started out as an endeavour to teach the convicted Jefferson the lessons of integrity, identity and manhood has, in the end, turned into Grant's own transformation as he gives up his disapproving and condescending attitude towards the community. As a consequence, he finds himself more integrated into the community's life and discovers for himself a new identity: a human identity that allows him to be a positive influence on future generations. In the end, he resolves to tell his students about how one man stands in the face of death, thereby attempting to convey to them the value of dignity and pride that have always been characteristics of his people. Rather than displaying a pessimistic or indifferent attitude, as he did in the beginning, Grant now comes to grip with his responsibility, and his insight into his folk allows him to be "there" even when he is not "there" (*LBD*,3). He feels no longer any need to leave the community and has thus made a transition from an outsider, indifferent and cynic rebel to a potential leader. By finding his place in the community and by being able to assume his responsibility towards his people, Grant "has progressed from a contemptuous hopeless person to one who ultimately achieves humanity."[13]

Jefferson's process of maturation from a mere "brute" to a "man" is accelerated by the overwhelming communal affirmation he receives. Forging ties with others provides Jefferson with the strength necessary to change his attitude and to confront his future, a strength that receives a decisive boost when the rest of the community visits him. Each one of them offers something to him and thus makes him aware of the influence his behaviour will have on the people's perception of themselves. As Philip Auger remarks:

> **Jefferson shows with abundance the power to be gained in the spirit of mutual giving. Jefferson and the members of his community all gain in their actualizations of self–worth as they give to each other.[14]**

Jefferson's realization of his humanity is shown in his announcement: "Manners is for the living … food for the living too" (*LBD*,130). "Setting the table" by his godmother and Tante Lou in a respectable style, when visiting Jefferson in the prison dayroom, is a sign of their humanity. Their meal is shared with dignity and the "gallon" of ice cream is changed to a "cup" as Jefferson transforms from a "hog" to a "man". Even the dayroom is a setting for this

transformation where everyone can sit instead of standing or crouching in Jefferson's cell. He begins to cry as he says "lowly as I am, I am still part of the whole" (*LBD*,194). To cry, to feel, to show empathy and to apologize are all characteristics shared by humans.[15] Jefferson's acceptance of the children's Christmas gifts indicates his acceptance of others: another aspect of humanity. He also accepts eating his godmother's food to reflect his love and to denote his membership in the community and his motivation to share humanity with others. Jefferson's conversion to manhood and humanity inspires the young generation. Grant convinces him that he has a rare opportunity to become someone who can give something meaningful to his community and who can alter the slave myth. According to Anissa Janine Wardi it is affirmed that "individual triumphs must precede any meaningful societal change."[16]

Jefferson finally arrives at a redefinition of his human identity: "If I ain't nothing but a hog, how come they just don't knock me in the head like a hog? stab me like a hog? … Man walk on two foots; hogs on four hoofs." (*LBD*, 220) Jefferson thus successfully abdicates the lable imposed on him as he can now express his common status with the rest of the community: "Yes, I'm youman, Mr. Wiggins. But nobody didn't know that 'fore now … You too, Mr. Wiggins. You never thought I was nothing else. I didn't neither" (*LBD*,224). In a symbolic play on words, Gaines captures Jefferson's goal to be recognized as a man. The word "human" is spelled "youman". This suggests that Jefferson subconsciously says to himself, as he wishes for the community to declare, "You, Jefferson, are a man". Conjoined, the words confirm Jefferson's status as an individual. As the community has served witness to the defense attorney's pronouncement of Jefferson's inhumanity, it is important to Jefferson that the community knows he is indeed a man.

Though a semi–illiterate field hand, Jefferson has the opportunity to rise above the words of the defense attorney and teach himself and others something about dignity, self–respect, strength and integrity. His intellectual limitations do not negate the knowledge of his own humanity. As he faces death, he also defends his right to be recognized as a human even though, he, too, sees little value in himself. He is "a particular person who struggles with the burden of his humanity."[17]

The community's benefit becomes more obvious when one considers the legacy Jefferson will leave after his death. In one of his last visits to jail, Grant brings Jefferson first a radio, then a pencil and a notebook. In his lonely days and hours before his death, Jefferson

gradually transfers the voices he hears on the radio to his own mind, thereby producing his own voice. Writing down his thoughts and feelings in what will turn out to be his diary constitutes the decisive transformative effect on Jefferson as Valerie Melissa Babb notes:

> **[W]riting fulfills two fundamental needs for Jefferson: it helps him to crystallize fleeting ideas, and, more important, it assists him in coming to terms with … his death.[18]**

Finding the voice he had been denied all his life, Jefferson is finally able not only to deconstruct the identity and reality imposed on him by both white and black societies, but also to reconstruct and redefine a new identity, acknowledge his humanity and position himself as a community hero. The following excerpt from Jefferson's diary, frequently praised as Gaines's single most brilliant piece of writing, illustrates Jefferson's completed transformation into a proud man. Written without punctuation and capitalization, it not only conveys Jefferson's authentic voice but also proves the power of self–expression and the humanity and dignity that he has reclaimed prior to his death:

> **mr wiggin i just feel like tellin you i like you but i dont kno how to say this cause i aint never say it to nobody before an nobody aint never say it to me … i aint done this much thinking and this much writin in all my life before … when they brot me in the room an i seen nana [his godmother] at the table i seen how ole she look an how tied she look an i tol her i love her an i tol her i was strong … an i let her hol me long is she want cause you say it was good for her an i tol i was strong an she didn need to come back no mo cause i was strong an she just set ther wit her eyes mos shet like she want to go to sleep …i been shakin an shakin but im gon stay strong … good by mr wiggin. tell them im strong tell them im a man good by mr wiggin im gon**

ax paul if he can bring you this [the diary]. (*LBD*, 228 –34)

At the trial, Jefferson's significance is collectively assumed by the system that condemns him to death. Much like the residents of the community who have come to witness the outcome of the trial, he is a quite observer and does not speak for himself. He is not permitted to speak on his own behalf once he had been pronounced guilty. Grant's request for him to keep a notebook of his thoughts and Jefferson's acceptance of the appeal signals the first time Jefferson has the opportunity to alter the public image and adopt an identity independent of the racist system which proclaims him inhuman.

Writing grants Jefferson superiority over an oppressive system which views him incapable of rational thought and behaviour. His diary becomes the agent for his evolution from "invisible plantation hand to a viable human being."[19] Despite its poor language, Jefferson's diary is intended to "elevate substance over form."[20] It operates within a context of call and response. Herman Beavers states:

> **From this vintage point, he is able to achieve coherence, where memory, reflection and sensation come together within the act of writing to assert that he has the resources necessary to meet death.[21]**

Jefferson's diary moves from his sense of invisibility to a man becoming aware of his obligations and actions. He challenges the view of the lawyer as being "not much" by continuing to "go deep" inside himself. His self–esteem sets him free from the thought of his imprisonment in four–walled cell. He is now seen by everyone: the jailors, prisoners and the community. He is also able to "see" beyond his current circumstances, another layer of humanity that Jefferson reaches when he begins to realize his inappropriate choice in going to the liquore store, separating himself psychologically from Brother and Bear, the two young blacks: "i aint had no bisnes goin ther wit brother an bear cause they aint no good an im gon be meetin them soon" (*LBD*,233). Jefferson even acquires intellectual capability in starting to analyze white characters through their eyes and denying or accepting favours from them. Once he starts writing, the jailers are invisible to him due to his self–confidence in his actions which further his human entity. Death provides an outlet to Jefferson's fears and sorrows after

he is "dead and gone" (*LBD*,230). His movement from fear to emotional revelation is a critical step in his journey to manhood. He is determined to walk to his death with quite dignity "That's how I want to go, Mr. Wiggins. Not a mumbling word" (*LBD*,223). The last entry of the notebook addresses Grant to "speak" to the community (Whites and Blacks) on his behalf "tell them im strong tell them im a man" (*LBD*,234). The diary remains his quest for "visibility and recognition"[22] and serves to be "humanizing and empowering."[23]

In the end, the diary is passed into the hands of Grant who will not only preserve Jefferson's memory, but also transmit the story of his heroism to his students who assume the identical posture that Jefferson manages during the moments before his execution. They are strong, brave and resolute. By having faced death and standing like a man, Jefferson ultimately proves his humanity and will additionally serve as an inspiration and moral boost to others in the community. Jefferson thus impressively complies with the demand made in Claude Mckay's famous poem "If We Must Die":

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead! [24]

Not only has Jefferson's death been noble, but it will also be acknowledged by his oppressors, "the monsters we defy", who will ultimately be constrained to "honour us though dead". The latter is exemplified by the white deputy Paul Bonin who witnesses the execution:

'He was the strongest man in that crowded room' …
When Vincent [the executioner] asked him if he had any last words, he looked at the preacher and said,'Tell Nannan I walked'. And straight he walked,

Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked. I'm a witness.

Straight he walked. (*LBD*, p.254)

In doing so, Jefferson dispels the notion of what he has been called: a hog. His assertion that he has "to be a man an set in a cher" (*LBD*,234) dismantles his earlier claim of being "nothing else." He now stands "big and tall, and not stooped as he had been in chains" (*LBD*,225). In the process, he redefines his image as merely a "cornered animal" into that of a man who is now ready to stand and make, what Gaines calls, "the ultimate sacrifice."[25] In an interview with Gaines, he replied to a question about his belief in creative suffering as Martin Luther King, Jr. believed, "You have to suffer in order to make any changes … And it has to begin with one person, … willing to pay a big price to make this change."[26]

Jefferson's diary indeed becomes the new script for the community, as it reverses white society's definition of African Americans as victimized, while simultaneously underlying the rich positive resources of African American culture. John Lowe reminds us that the diary has "a powerful counterpart historically in the magnificent blues songs that grew out of the African American prison population."[27] In addition, Jefferson's diary recalls both Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the works they wrote in jail. Like Malcolm X, Jefferson fashions a positive identity and creates a new self out of confinement, and like Dr. King in his "Letter From Birmingham Jail," he spreads the words of love and the common humanity of all. Jefferson's diary will occupy a place of historical significance in the community and serve as a document to help others understand the value of their lives.

Jefferson's "blood [has not been] shed in vain" as demanded by Mckay, but bequeathed a legacy that is pivotal for Grant's own process of maturation as well as for the rest of the community, both black and white. Jefferson's diary may thus be interpreted as a new "Bible" as some critics have observed. This "Bible" will teach the words of love, humanity and integrity and confirm the common humanity of all. Jefferson's death represents a revelation for the community in that it inspires others and contributes to a heretofore nonexistent feeling of pride. Since Jefferson refuses to succumb to the definition imposed on him by an oppressive society, he may well be regarded as a rebel, who subverts the racist rationale that denies him his humanity, and who replaces it with a proud, but quiet, assertiveness. Jefferson exemplifies

Gaines's tenet that "standing" or reclaiming one's human dignity will not go unnoticed, but will initiate gradual and decisive change in the parish. To Gaines it is not the matter of Jefferson being guilty or innocent rather than "how he feels about himself at the end."[28] Then it is "the quality of Jefferson's dying"[29] that leads Gaines to disdain the black culture because it is constructed "to endure oppression, not to end it,"[30]: the oppression of humans toward humans. Yet, Jefferson's acceptance of his humanity in the end as a dignified member in his society represents the first step towards ending this oppression and starts a new phase of human coexistence that admits black humanity. Consequently, Grant: the teacher; Jefferson: the death inmate; Miss Emma: Jefferson's godmother and her friend Tante Lou: Grant's aunt and the children in the classroom are all trying to be respected in a community that is grounded in the violation of human entity and dignity.

End Notes

[1]N'Guessan Koffi Eugene, "From Meaningless Life to Meaningful Death in Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*". (URL:http//www.death_life.org/eugene.alesson-before-dying/ernest-gaines.htm). March 5, 2012.

[2]Keith Byerman, *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapil Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p.47.

[3]Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2001), pp. 7–8. Subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and will be incorporated within the text by the abbreviation LBD with page number[s] as follows: (*LBD*, page number).

[4]James Henry Harris, *The Word Made Plain: The Power and Promise of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p.66.

[5]Ed Piacentino, ""The Common Humanity That Is in Us All": Toward Racial Reconciliation in Gaines's a Lesson before Dying" in *Southern Quarterly*. vol. 42, Issue: 3, 2004.

[6]Matthew Spangler, "Of Snow and Dust: The Presence of James Joyce in Ernest Gaines's "A Lesson Before Dying"" in *South Atlantic Review*. vol. 67, No. 1 (Winter, 2002), p.111.

[7]Philip Auger, "A Lesson About Manhood: Appropriating the Word in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*" in *Southern Literary Journal* (vol. 27, 1995), p.75.

[8]Suzanne Jones, "Reconstructing Manhood: Race, Masculinity and Narrative Closure in Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* and *A Lesson Before Dying*" in *Masculinities*, vol. 3 (1995), p.57.

[9]Quoted in Gwen Watson, "Searching For Humanity Through the Eyes of Ernest Gaines: Nonverbal Communication in *A Lesson Before Dying*". (URL:http://www.toto.lib.unca.edu/sr_papers/literature-sr/literature-2008/watson-gwen.pdf) March 5, 2012.

[10]Jeffery J. Folks, "Communal Responsibility in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*" in *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 52 (1999).

[11]Ibid.

[12]Lee Papa, " " 'His Feet on Your Neck' ": The New Religion in the Works of Ernest J. Gaines" in *African American Review*, vol. 27, No. 2, Black South Issue, Part 2 of 2 (Summer, 1993), p.187.

[13] Watson.

[14] Auger, p.82.

[15]Elise Ann Earthman, "What a teacher learns: Ernest J. Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) in *Women in Literature: Reading Through the Lens of Gender*, Jerilyn Fisher, Ellen S. Siber, eds. (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 2003), p.169.
[16]Anissa Janine Wardi, "Review" in *Melus*, vol. 21, No. 2, Varieties of Ethnic Criticism (Summer, 1996), p.194.
[17]Quoted in Corina Anghel Crisu, "'Tell Nannan I Walked': Reconstructing Manhood in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*", vol. 55 (URL:http://www.zaa.uni-tuebigen.de/wp-content/uploads/crisu-2007-2.pdf) August 20, 2012. p.161.
[18]Valerie Melissa Babb, *Ernest Gaines* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), p.262.
[19]Anne Gray Brown, "Writing For Life: 'jefferson's Diary' as Transformative Text in Ernest J. Gaines's *a Lesson before Dying*" in *Southern Quarterly*, vol. 47, issue: 1, 2009.
[20]Herman Beavers, *Wrestling Angels into Song: The Fictions of Ernest J. Gaines and James McPherson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p.177.
[21]Ibid., p.176.
[22]Anne Gray Brown, "Writing For Life: 'jefferson's Diary' as Transformative Text in Ernest J. Gaines's a Lesson before Dying."
[23] Byerman, p.52.
[24]Claude Mckay, "If We Must Die" in *Selected Poems of Claude Mckay* (New York: Bookman, 1953), p.36.
[25]Anne Gray Brown, "The Scribe of River Lake Plantation: A Conversation With Ernest J. Gaines" in *Southern Quarterly*, vol. 44 (2006).
[26]Wolfgang Lepschy and Ernest J. Gaines, "A Melus Interview: Ernest J. Gaines" in *Melus*, vol. 24, No. 1, African American Literature (Spring, 1999), p.206.
[27]John Lowe, ed., Conversation With Ernest Gaines (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995), p.158.
[28]Anne Gray Brown, "Writing For Life: 'jefferson's Diary' as Transformative Text in Ernest J. Gaines's a Lesson before Dying."
[29] Byerman, p.48.
[30]Ibid.

"الأنسانية المشتركة بيننا جميعآ":
رواية أرنست غاينز *درس قبل الموت*

م. نبراس جواد كاظم
كلية التربية للبنات/ جامعة بغداد - قسم اللغة الأنكليزية
م. فاطمة رضا عطية
كلية العلوم السياسية/ جامعة بغداد

خلاصة ...

من باكورة أعماله الى أحدث رواياته (*درس قبل الموت*) يكتب أرنست غاينز الكاتب الأفروأميركي بأستمرار عن جماعات تواجه مشكلات تخص حرمانها من أنسانيتها وكرامتها وقيمتها الذاتية. يختار غاينز في (*درس قبل الموت*) هذا الهدف لسارد القصة ،غرانت ويغينز، الذي أخذ على عاتقه مسؤولية أقناع جيفرسن – وهو عامل غير متعلم تم الحكم عليه بالموت لجريمة لم يرتكبها – بأنه "أنسان" وليس حيواناً كما أشار اليه محامي الدفاع ذو البشرة البيضاء. يلخص البحث صراع أنسان للحصول على إقرار بأنسانيته وكيف أن هذا الأقرار سّينشأ تحولآ إيجابياً في المجتمع.