

The Power of Love Incites a Revolution in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

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Abstract:

Ernest J. Gaines is a famous black American novelist who dedicated himself to reflecting the suffering of the blacks in the 1940s. His novel *A Lesson Before Dying* is about racism in South America in Louisiana after the Civil War and before the Civil Rights. Occasionally, black revolutionists tried to shake the white patriarchy. Gaines depicts the struggle of a black male, Jefferson, and his adoption of a revolutionary attempt. He is unjustly accused of murder and is sentenced to death. In the trial, the white attorney calls him a hog and this hurts his aunt Miss Emma. The power of her love moves, nearly, all the characters through manipulation. She wants Jefferson to believe that he is a man: she persuades Grant Wiggins, an educated teacher, to visit Jefferson in jail and convince him that he is a man. The lesson that is taught to Jefferson before he dies frees his mind and enables him to walk straight to death like a man. This study applies three theories to the novel. According to Terry Eagleton, Gaines is a true socialist worker who uses his novel to remove the society's suffering through inciting the blacks to revolt against the whites' patriarchy. According to Henry Louis Gate, Jefferson uses writing as a means of sharing in community. Before he dies, the development that occurred in his character was greatly fulfilled with the help of writing. According to Jacques Lacan, all Grant, Jefferson and Gaines are Oedipus complex patients who reject the whites' oppression that represents the symbolic father. The power of Emma's love enables Jefferson to walk straight to death. This action gives the blacks the psychological inspiration to ignite the sparks of revolution through freeing their minds.

Key words: patriarchy- Social worker- Oedipus Complex- Civil Rights

Introduction:

Ernest J. Gaines is a famous black American novelist. Anisa Janine Wardi illustrates that his novel *A Lesson Before Dying* "is his eighth work of fiction and the winner of the National Book Critics Circle award." (192) Gaines depicts the struggle of the black males in South America in Louisiana after the Civil War and before the Civil Rights. During this period, the whites tried to preserve their economic and political concerns by applying the Jim Crow laws. This imposed many oppressing and humiliating laws on the blacks. From time to time black revolutionists tried to shake the white patriarchy by diverse means. A

The Power of Love Incites a Revolution in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

Lesson Before Dying reflects an attempt of a black male to adopt one of these means. He is unjustly accused of murder and is sentenced to death on the electrocution. In the trial, the white attorney tries to convince the jury that Jefferson is a working hog that has no mind, as a way of defending him. Calling him a hog hurts both Jefferson and all the blacks, including his aunt Miss Emma. The power of her love moves the plot of the novel and, nearly, all the characters through manipulation. She wants Jefferson to believe that he is a man: she persuades Grant Wiggins, an educated teacher, to go to Jefferson in jail and convince him that he is a man. The lesson of manhood that is taught to Jefferson before he dies frees his mind and enables him to die like a man.

Methods of Research:

This study investigates Jacques Lacan's The Names-of-the-Father theory that he presents in his seminars, Terry Eagleton's The Revolutionary Rhetoric theory that he presents in his book *Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, and Henry Louis Gates's The Trope of the Talking Book theory that he presents in his book *The Signifying Monkey* with a special reference to Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*.

This study applies Jacques Lacan's The Names-of-the-Father theory, Terry Eagleton's The Revolutionary Rhetoric theory, and Henry Louis Gates's The Trope of the Talking Book theory to the novel.

The Rationale:

The rationale behind this study is to uncover the grievous oppression to which the black community was exposed during the time of the novel.

The objective of the study:

The main objective of the study is to apply the previously mentioned three theories to the novel. The interaction amongst these disciplines will help, thoroughly, understand and unfold the dimensions of the novelist's point of view and the hidden perspectives inside his novel.

Theories Applied to the Novel:

1-Terry Eagleton's The Revolutionary Rhetoric Theory:

In his book *Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, Eagleton anatomizes The Revolutionary Rhetoric theory. Eagleton presents some hypotheses that will be analyzed here. Firstly, Eagleton states that "any socialist involved in Teaching knows that nothing is more 'ideologically' effective than knowledge." (112) He shows the

importance of knowledge to a socialist- when an author aims to reform society through his literature, then, he will be considered a socialist. In this case, he will be knowledgeable when he writes about a real history or from his memories. Secondly, Eagleton points out that "the only reason for being a socialist is that one objects to the fact that the great majority of men and women in history have lived lives of suffering and degradation, and believes that this may conceivably be altered in the future." (112) For Eagleton, a socialist must believe that the past people's suffering will not be removed by itself, in the future, but needs some socialists to act in order to remove it. Thirdly, Eagleton shows:

the text so fictionalizes the 'real'... in the light of a particular set of falsifiable hypotheses about the nature of society, to be desirable. The practice of the socialist cultural worker, in brief, is... polemical... . You could show how subtly its structural symmetry and utopian impulse belie the political inequality it challenges. (112- 113)

The text reshapes reality, using some invented assumptions about society in order to reach a desired society. The social worker's task must be offensive: the author may employ his text's harmony and character's utopian morals to attack the political unjust. When an author achieves these three hypnoses in his text, it will be considered a revolutionary rhetoric.

2- Henry Louis Gates's The Trope of the Talking Book Theory:

In his book *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates analyzes The Trope of the Talking Book theory. It handle's the Afro- American use of writing as a means of achieving the freedom of mind: "The slave wrote not primarily to demonstrate human letters, but to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community." (128) Gates points out that the blacks resort to writing as a means of sharing in the human community that they feel they are separated from. They feel that they are human beings when they practice writing. In his book *'Writing' 'Race' and the Difference It Makes*, Gates discusses the symbolic feature of writing for the blacks: "Writing... was taken to be the visible sign of reason. Blacks were 'reasonable' and hence 'men,' if- and only if- they demonstrated mastery over 'the art and science.'" (8) Writing is a sign of reason and when the blacks master arts and sciences, they will be called men.

3- Jacques Lacan's The Names-of-the-Father Theory:

In his article *Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father Seminar*, Lacan presents the fact that his theory is a development of Sigmund Freud's Oedipus Complex theory:

The Power of Love Incites a Revolution in Ernest J. Gaines's A Lesson Before Dying

If Freud places at the center of his teaching the myth of the Father...
The entirety of analytic theory and praxis appear to us at present... go further than Freud. (87)

His developed theory provides untrodden grounds that go beyond Freud's. Lacan extends the role of the father:

The primordial father is the father from before... the appearance of law... . The father is the head of that hoard whose satisfaction... knows no bounds. That Freud should call him a totem.

As a second term what is needed at the level of the father is that function whose definition I believe I developed ..., the function of the proper. (88)

Lacan's father is a developed version from Freud's and his function in the life of an Oedipus Complex patient is wider and more proper: it is no longer confined to the real father. Lacan demonstrates:

The name, I demonstrated to you, is a mark already open reading... It represents... a strictly literal interpretation of the function of the father, of 'the Supreme Being'... . He is taken in a strictly literal interpretation of the letter... as interested in the order of the world. (88-89)

The extension of the role of the father includes the order of the world or the authorities that impose it. Lacan calls that developed father the 'Supreme Being'. Anthony Wdilen in *System and Structure: Essays in communication and exchange*, presents an excellent analysis of Lacan's Names-of-the-Father:

The Name-of-the-Father represents what Lacan calls the symbolic father. . . . The requirements of Freud's theory, says Lacan, led him to link the apparition of the signifier of the father, as author of the law, to the death of the father. . . . Since Name-of-the-Father has never been successfully repressed, it is rejected, and with it, asserts Lacan, the whole symbolic order. (281- 282)

According to Freud, during childhood, the father inhibits the child's union with his mother. The child wishes to satisfy his asexual desire towards his mother. Consequently, he decides to kill his father and marry

his mother. When the child becomes an adult, he represses and forgets this desire. Later on, he may regress to that desire and become an Oedipus complex patient. For Lacan, the Name-of-the-Father may, symbolically, play the role of the real father in the patient's mind. For this reason, it is called the symbolic father. In this case, the patient substitutes the real father's inhibition for that of the symbolic father: the order of the world and the authorities that impose it. As a result, he desires to kill it. Because he can't kill it, he resorts to rejecting it and revolting against it.

Research Questions:

- 1-Does Jefferson move a step towards freeing his mind when he writes his journals, according to Gates?
- 2-Do Gaines, Grant, and Jefferson seek to destroy the white patriarchs because they represent the Names-of-the-Father, according to Lacan?
- 3-Is Gaies's *A Lesson Before Dying* a revolutionary rhetoric, according to Eagleton?

Literature Review:

- 1- *Gaines's Preachers and Their People: Personalism, Community, and Social Action in A Lesson Before Dying, In My Father's House, and A Gathering of Old Men* by Brooke E. Light. This study presents the role played by the preachers in the black community in Gaines's three novels.
- 2- *Confronting Manhood: The Struggle of Male Characters in the fiction of Ernest J. Gaines* by Katie Fay. This study presents the black male characters' contend to achieve freedom and change of identity in the novels of Gaines.
- 3- *A Post- colonial Assessment of Rural Teacher Characters in Australia, Canada, and American Novels* by Mary Robyn Adams. This study presents the teachers and their role in different communities.
- 4- *Windows to (The) Soul: An Interpretative Study of Cultural Eye Behaviour and Spiritual Sight in Novels of Ernest J. Gaines* by Veronica Adams Yon. This study presents the eye communication patterns of characters in Gaines's novels.
- 5- *Heavy Things: Materiality and Masculinity in African American Literature* by Scott Thomas Gibson. This study presents the male characters search for their masculinity in African American literature.

The Summary of the Novel:

The story of the novel is about racism in South America in Louisiana, in the 1940s. It is about the oppression that the blacks suffered on the hands of the whites. It starts with Jefferson, a slow-witted 21 years old black

The Power of Love Incites a Revolution in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

male, being sentenced to death on the electrocution for a crime that the whites, because he is black, assume he committed: he was accused of a crime that he did not commit. He stayed for six months before the day of the execution. In the day of the crime, he was in the wrong time and wrong place. During the trial, the white lawyer defends him by calling him a hog. On hearing that, Emma, his grandmother and the one that raised him, is shocked. She asks Grant Wiggins, an educated black teacher, to go to jail, meet Jefferson, and convince him that he is a man not a hog. With the passage of visits, Grant succeeds in his mission. Grant asks him to walk to the electrocution in order to give an example of a black man to all the blacks and defy the whites' oppression. Eventually, he complies and walks to death, without fear, like a human.

Analysis:

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines tries to employ Jefferson's death as a means of seeking equality between the races. He tries to show Jefferson's mind and its development till he reaches manhood to the readers. Jane Gordon Yarbrough, in her review of the novel, illustrates: "Transfiguration is the theme of this novel..." (116) At the time of his death, Jefferson is completely different from the boy that was sentenced to death, and his behaviours and beliefs are not the same as well.

When Miss Emma visits Jefferson, for the first time, he snorts and kneels on the floor, eating his dinner without using his hands. Jefferson says: "That's how a old hog eat." (68, Lesson) Jefferson is possessed by the idea that he is a hog and starts mimicking it. SparkNotes Editors, in their article "*SparkNote on A Lesson Before Dying*," show that he does so because "he becomes terrified and infuriated, obsessed by the possibility that he really is no better than a hog. He rages in his cell mimicking a hog's behaviour." (Jefferson) The lawyer's calling Jefferson a hog has disturbed the young boy's psyche and shaken his self-esteem. This causes a feeling of inferiority to the degree of imitating a hog.

Grant succeeds in convincing Jefferson that he is a man and convinced him to walk to the electrocution like a human. Laslie Lockhart shows that Jefferson achieves manhood when he walks to the electrocution: "Jefferson is able to walk to the electric chair, as a man, without bowed head or bent back. Jefferson's final journal entries indicate his reconnection with his humanity." (66) Jefferson becomes a man and his journals tell.

Gaines makes a symbol out of Jefferson. SparkNotes Editors stress: "Jefferson now has the opportunity to stand up for his community. He

has become a symbol to his people." (Plot Review) Jefferson gives his black community a proof and a hope that they have men amongst them and they can do more than what he did to seek freedom. He strengthens his people's self- confidence and determination. David E. Vancil thinks that Jefferson's death presents redemption: "Redemption is not just an act of acceptance or acknowledging, but a process by which individuals may ameliorate conditions and improve society."(490) In Jefferson's case, redemption is not a matter of acknowledgment from the members of the black community, but they must take action to improve their state, considering Jefferson's death the first spark that ignites the revolution against the white patriarchs. Wardi comments on considering Jefferson a symbol: "Jefferson becomes a symbol of hope for the entire African American community. He inspires the community... . This seemingly small act of heroism upset the white power ..." (193) Jefferson's heroic death inspires the blacks to follow his path and to become heroes as well.

Lowe quotes Mary Ellen Dole in his review of her article *Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*; Dole likens Jefferson to the Christ and calls him "a Christ-like teacher." (227) Jefferson is wrongly accused, and never protested and accepts his sentence, just like the Christ did. Philip Auger elucidates: "Jefferson's Christ- figure significance establishes an allegorical dimension to *A Lesson Before Dying*... . Miss Emma ... from her ultimately springs a new identity for Jefferson and his followers." (81) Allegorically, Jefferson is considered a Christ- like and he gathers the blacks around him as followers, just like the Christ did. This is affirmed when Jefferson recognizes that by walking to death, he will take the cross of all the black community. He speaks to Grant: "Me, Mr. Wiggins. Me. Me to take the cross. Your cross, nannan's cross, my cross..." (183, Lesson) The reiteration of the word 'Me' shows how much Jefferson is afraid, hesitant and magnifies the task that is entitled to him.

Jefferson did not become a symbol and a Christ- figure without the help of some characters that will be analyzed.

Characters Affecting Jefferson's Character Development:

1- Grant Wiggins:

He is an educated African American teacher. He teaches in a school for the blacks. Mary Robyn Adams comments on the role of the teacher of minority students in Gaines's novels: "In all these novels which feature teachers of minority students, teachers bring knowledge of the world beyond isolated rural areas and globalization occurs." (168) In Grant's case, he tries to open the black students to the world that they can not

The Power of Love Incites a Revolution in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

access and this leads to globalization. He tries to teach them how to be like the whites.

What fails and disappoints Grant is the oppression of the whites to the blacks, especially in school. Martin N. Marger comments on the oppression of Jim Crow laws in schools: "All public facilities and schools were separated by race, creating in effect a racial caste system." (291) During this period the white students were educated in separate schools to receive better education. An example of that oppression can be found in Mr. Joseph's visit, the superintendent, to Grant's school. Katie Fay comments: "Mr. Joseph refuses to acknowledge Grant's progress with the students. Immediately, Mr. Joseph denies Grant's teaching position by treating him with apathy and referring to him as 'Mr. Higgins,' instead of his real name, Wiggins." (84) Mr. Joseph despises Grant by ignoring his efforts with the students; instead, he belittles him by saying his name incorrectly. What bothers Grant more is that after correcting his name to Mr. Joseph, the latter insists on calling him by the wrong name.

Another situation that elucidates Grant's feeling of being oppressed is when he and Miss Emma go to Mr. Pichot's house, the plantation owner and the brother-in-law of the sheriff, to plead for giving Grant a chance to visit Jefferson. Grant has to enter Mr. Pichot's Yard from the back door, because he is black, and he says to his aunt: "I had not come through that back door once since leaving the university, ten years before." (16, Lesson) Grant's going from the back door deepens his feeling of degradation. What increases this feeling is that he has to wait for Mr. Pichot for four hours in the kitchen until he comes home. Lauren J. Roth illustrates: "Grant... is being treated as if he had no value, though he is a respectable man with a university education. To escape his oppression, Grant refuses to eat in the kitchen, and waits until he gets to his home." (13) Grant resists his hunger for eating in Mr. Pichot's kitchen because he rejects inferiority.

The last example of the whites' oppression of the blacks can be found in Grant's attempt to show his education to the whites and this is met by sarcasm. When Grant meets the sheriff Guidry, he, intentionally, uses correct grammar as a kind of showing his education. This made the sheriff get bothered. Grant says to the sheriff:

She's old, I said. She
Doesn't feel that she has the strength...
She doesn't, huh? Sam Guidry

Asked me. He emphasized ' doesn't.' (19, Lesson)

Grant irritates Sam Guidry by using correctly grammared English sentence and does not use incorrect one like other blacks do. Grant's attempt is met with sarcasm because the whites hate any educated black.

The recurrence of the white oppression of the blacks makes Grant take it for granted that there is no use resisting the whites' oppression. This increases his passivity. This passivity is evident in the opening scene when he refuses to attend the trial because he knows the judgment in advance: "I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be?" (1- Lesson) Grant is passive and prefers to hide. Brooke E. Light affirms Grant's passivity: "By not attending the trial out of his knowledge of its outcome, Grant initially chooses passivity over action, believing any action to be futile..." (20) Being in the opening scene makes it clear that taking a social action in the community is a basic tension in the novel. His passivity is the reason beyond refusing to accept the task of convincing Jefferson to die like a man. Under Miss Emma's request, Tane Lou- Grant's aunt who worked in Mr. Pichot's house with Miss Emma and both are friends- forces Grant to accept the task. Reluctantly, Grant accepts the task. Fenice Boyd illuminates: "The teacher's charge is to teach the young man to die like a man." (147)

Grant's task to teach Jefferson how to be a man is not an easy one and the former must, first, get rid of his feeling of superiority over the blacks. Vancil assures: "Before Wiggins, the disdainful observer, can help another person, he must first be delivered from his own malaise of resentment against his people..." (489) Being the only educated person in the plantation, Grant stands in a middle ground between the whites and the blacks. He hates the whites for they oppress him, and he despises the blacks for they remind him of being inferior and he even calls Jefferson a hog. Alisa Ann Johnson believes: "Part of Grant's resistance to the task... is based on his belief in the overall inadequacy of all black males, including himself." (169) Grant's feeling of inadequacy and belief in the blacks', as well, are the reasons behind his first rejection of helping Jefferson. He, also, considers accepting this task a confirmation and reminder of his inferiority.

After accepting the task, Grant uses some means to achieve his task: dialogue, exchanging gifts, writing a diary and the social visits. Grant wants to wake the man inside Jefferson by convincing him to walk to the electrocution. The first means is dialogue. As a start, Grant visits Jefferson, telling him about the love of his godmother Emma and he must die like a man for her: "You owe something, Jefferson, Not to

The Power of Love Incites a Revolution in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

me... . But to your godmother." (114, Lesson) Grant tells Jefferson that if he walks straight to death, this will give Miss Emma a good thing in return for taking care of and loving him his whole life. Again, Grant tells Jefferson about the features of heroes and this urges him to be one: "A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men do not and can not do." (156, Lesson) Grant tells Jefferson that he must be a hero and act bravely for all the backs in the plantation by walking straight to death. Grant keeps urging Jefferson through telling him about what the whites feel about the blacks: "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." (157, Lesson) According to Grant, 'the common humanity' is a natural thing inside all human beings and when a man shows it, he proves a human being. SparkNotes Editors confirm that Grant wants to urge Jefferson to walk straight to death and "in trying to move Jefferson to die with dignity... Grant begins to think of him as a Christ figure- repenting in front of Jefferson and saying that he feels lost." (Motifs) Jefferson's feeling of responsibility is magnified when Grant repents in front of him. Grant considers Jefferson a Christ-like and this strengthens his self-worth.

Another means of teaching Jefferson to be a man is gifts exchange: Grant gives Jefferson a diary and a radio. Scott Thamas Gibbson comments on the act of giving in *A Lesson Before Dying*: "The act of giving supplants the oppressive socioeconomic conditions that antagonize black life in Quarters, physically and psychologically imprisoning Jefferson and Grant." (43) The imprisonment of both Jefferson and Grant is the outcome of social and economic chains and they are, temporarily, abolished by the act of giving. When Grant gives Jefferson a radio, he makes him open to the world. He starts speaking with Grant about things he knew from the radio. Conversing makes him feel that he is an important person who may make friends and may be befriended by others.

When Grant gives Jefferson a diary, he give him a chance, for the first time, to get out his feelings. This opens his mind and imposes many questions about life and others around him, both the whites and the blacks. The diary is Grant's means of teaching Jefferson about life and it gives him a means of teaching himself as well. It spots a great step in the transformation of a hog to be a man.

Grant's last means of teaching Jefferson to be a man is the multiple visits that are paid by the members of the black community of the plantation. Grant's students visit Jefferson as well. They make Jefferson

sure of his importance and of the importance of walking straight to death to the people that he loves. Now, he is aware of the enormity of what he is about to do before he dies and of the fact that this will give hope, proud and inspiration to all the blacks.

Grant's means of teaching Jefferson to be a man are successful and make Jefferson come to terms with death and remove fear from his heart. Veronica Adam Yon assures: "Jefferson's nonverbal behaviour (his ability to walk straight to the chair) reflects a change that has transpired." (89) Jefferson's walking straight to death reflects a development in his character because no hog does that. Johnson points out: "Jefferson's actions so affect Paul... . The life- changing impact of Jefferson's actions on him is apparent in his description." (175). Jefferson's actions have a lasting impact that inspires the blacks to revolt against the whites. Symbolically, Jefferson gives a new model of the black man. Jefferson's action affects Paul- his jailer- and this effect is clear in Paul's description of the execution scene to Grant: "straight he walked... . I saw the transformation. I'm a witness to that." (202, Lesson) Paul saw Jefferson's transformation because the latter became a man.

To conclude, though a passive black man all his past life, Grant, now, becomes a successful teacher who teaches Jefferson the lesson of manhood. Grant uses some means to achieve his task: dialogue, exchanging gifts, writing a diary and the social visits. Finally, Jefferson walks straight to the electrocution before the execution like a man.

2- Miss Emma:

Miss Emma is Jefferson's godmother and she had taken care of him during his past life. Shmoop Editorial Team stresses that life goes against her and "she is losing her only family member unfairly... . But she remains steadfast." (Miss Emma) In the trial, she is losing her only family member but she keeps herself unperturbed. Fay elucidates: "The shock of the trial and Jefferson's sentence does not disturb his Godmother Emma as much as the implication that he is not a man. When the trial finishes, Emma visits her friend Tante Lou, Grant Wiggin's aunt, to try to convince Grant to visit Jefferson." (76) Emma's cold reaction towards Jefferson's sentence reflects her agonizing acceptance of the whites' oppression, however, that towards Jefferson's label as a hog reflects her complete rejection. She accepts his death, but rejects his humiliation and degradation to the degree of a hog. She is a very determined old woman that never retreats in the face of problems. The first problem that requires a solution is to convince Jefferson that he is a man. She asks Tante Lou to convince Grant to visit Jefferson in jail to convince him that he is a man. The second problem is to convince the

The Power of Love Incites a Revolution in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

Sheriff, Mr. Pichot's brother-in-law, to give Grant a permission to visit Jefferson. She works in Mr. Pichot's house from a long time and this gives her the courage to ask him to convince the Sheriff to give that permission. She succeeds to solve both problems, because she is skilful in manipulating people and convincing them to do what she wants them to do. Her love and commitment to her relative move her and, eventually, the power of her love could make a man out of a hog.

Style:

1-plot:

The plot of the novel is well- woven. Robin A. Bedenbaugh clarifies that it moves around one motto: "Whites' treatment of blacks as if they 'hogs' and blacks' acceptance of that label." (65) The black major characters of the novel try hard to demolish such a humiliating label. Miss Emma is the most active black character in the novel. She pushes actions forward, using her unbent determination and courage. Her love to Jefferson gives her the power to achieve her goals and move the actions to the novel's end. Her effect on Jefferson is clear in his last words to Paul: "Tell Nannan I walked." (202, Lesson) She is the most effective motivation that makes Jefferson walk to death. He believes that he wants to give something in return to her love to and caring of him his whole life. The major conflict is inside Jefferson. He has an internal conflict between two internal powers: his desire to make all the blacks proud of him, and his fears of the white patriarchy and belief in his inferiority. Eventually, the former won the battles and the climax reached when it, actually, moves him straight to death. Gaines could, perfectly, weave his plot, taking the actions, smoothly, to the desired end.

2-Flashback:

Gaines uses the technique of flashback when Grant remembers his past teacher Matthew Antoine. He warned Grant of staying in the plantation, urging him to escape the white humiliation: "There was no freedom here... . You will be the loser, my friend." (51, Lesson) Here, he tells Gant that if he stays, he will be a loser because the whites will oppress him. Grant remembers Antoine's words when he notices that, now, his students are chopping the wood in the school and this was, exactly, what he was doing in school when Antonio was his teacher. This memory makes Grant doubt his teaching and all what he is doing in school: "Is it just a vicious circle? Am I doing anything?" (51, Lesson) Grant believes that it is a circle and all the blacks will have the same fate. This memory

makes Grant believe that there is no freedom in the plantation and deepens his sense of passivity.

3- Narration:

Gaines uses the first- person narrator, Grant, to reflect his point of view. This is clear from the first scene of the novel. Again, this makes the readers receive knowledge coloured by Grant's impressions and feelings and, to a great extent, covers other characters'. Gaines does not want to spoil the readers' reception by any other point of view other than Grant's or, otherwise, his.

4-Irony:

Gaines uses two ironies in the novel. Firstly, in order to avoid the useless battle of teaching Jefferson to be a man, Grant, ironically, oppresses Jefferson, repeats the lawyer's words and calls him a hog. Here, Grant calls Jefferson a hog, however, all the blacks are hogs as the whites label them; consequently, Grant is a hog too. By calling Jefferson a hog, Grant defends himself against that label: a black is a hog. He tells Vivian, his girl friend, that teaching Jefferson to be a man is futile: "He is still going to die. The next day, the next week, the next month. So what will I have accomplished? What will I have done? Why not let the hog die without knowing anything?" (21, Lesson) Grant's repetition of the word hog reflects his sense of fear. Grant projects this label on Jefferson as a kind of defense. According to Sigmund Freud:

The mechanism of projection is used to settle down an emotional conflict. . . . The projection of inner perceptions to the outside . . . influences our sense perceptions, so that normally has the greatest share in shaping our outer world. (85)

A neurotic uses projection as a reaction to an inner conflict. He projects his feelings, troubles, or sufferings on others in the outer world. For example, when one is bad in doing something, he tells others around him that they are bad in doing that thing. In Grant's case, he is a hog and he calls Jefferson a hog.

Secondly, irony appears in the paradoxical attitude of Grant: he has a deep faith in the futility of resisting the white patriarchy, even though, he accepts the task of convincing Jefferson that he is a man and, eventually, succeeds as well. This mysterious irony is justified by the fact that both Grant and Jefferson possess the same wish to be men in the white society. As a result, both have the same battle against the white patriarchy. Fay spots: "Grant is finally ready to teach Jefferson and, at the same time,

The Power of Love Incites a Revolution in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

learn to become a man." (90) Grant accepts the task, because he himself, unconsciously, wants to learn how to be a man. Both are powerless and confined. Grant is convinced that Jefferson's situation forms a crossroad for all the black community, because they all have a racial bond that puts them together in the same side of the battle.

Gaines uses these two ironies to let the readers inspect the sides of Grant's character: his passivity and inability to act unless from behind others, Jefferson. He teaches Jefferson to be a man and defy the white patriarchy; however, he could not be a man or defy the whites, face to face, before. He receives their humiliation and never reacts. He is an example of a coward black man.

Applying the Three Theories to Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*:

1-Terry Eagleton's The Revolutionary Rhetoric Theory:

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines write from his memories of his past life in Louisiana. He was raised by his aunt Augusteen Jefferson; his conditions are similar to Grant Wiggins's. Valeri Babb points out the importance of Louisiana: "Gaines's physical and psychic return to Louisiana represents more than nostalgia." (350) It is not only a matter of nostalgia for Gaines, but it is something deeper inside him. Lockhart comments on the setting of *A Lesson Before Dying*: "The novel is set in the 1940s, in Bayonne, Louisiana, which is the backdrop of all Gaines's fictional work." (65) All Gaines's novels are built on his life in Louisiana. Robert Butler assures: "Louisiana... fired his imaginations and centered all of his published fiction." (349) The importance of Louisiana for Gaines's novels is clear. Roth asserts: "Growing up in Louisiana was central to the formation of Gaines's identity, and his childhood community became a primary influence in his work." (1) Louisiana is central in all his novels.

Gaines was born in a plantation and it has a deep impact on his novels. Roth assures: "Gaines uses his memories of the kitchen from his memories in the plantation community." (21) The kitchen in his novels was depicted from his memories in the plantation; this spots the deep effect of the plantation. The plantation is central in all his novels.

His characters are real because he depicts them as reflections to people that he met in Louisiana plantation in the past. He is true and honest in his depiction because he did not invent them from his imaginations or stories that he read. Johnson illustrates: "Gaines often uses the African male experience as a prototype for the black experience." (153) Gaines often uses the black male protagonist's

experience as a common one that many black males got through; Jefferson's agony is a good example that reflects a prototype experience.

Gaines, as a socialist, writes out of his knowledge of 1940's Louisiana and his memories there. This shows how Knowledge shapes Gaines writing- according to Eagleton.

Gaines lived among the blacks of the 1940's Louisiana and witnessed their suffering. As a socialist, he thinks that he will remove this suffering, in the present, through exposing it in his novels. Again, he thinks he will remove its possible repetition in the future. According to Eagleton, Gaines is a true socialist who uses his literature to remove the society's suffering.

In shaping his novel, Gaines uses the past's reality but adds some invented hypnoses that lead to shaping a desired society. According to Eagleton, Gaines achieves the theory's third hypnosis when he tries to exploit the utopian morals of his characters in challenging the white political patriarchy.

Gaines could achieve Eagleton's three hypnoses in his novel. According to Eagleton, he is a true socialist and The Revolutionary Rhetoric theory is applicable to his novel.

2- Henry Louis Gates's The Trope of the Talking Book Theory:

Jefferson's diary educated him by giving him a chance to think of things around him and this developed his character. Auger shows:

A Lesson Before Dying explores the roles of social institutions such as education... as they all have a part in producing human dignity and self-worth... Jefferson does feel that he has experienced a change in identity by the novel's end... More specifically, Jefferson becoming a man at the novel's end... (75)

Through writing his diary, Jefferson's self- educated himself; this helps him develop his character. Auger adds that education is feared by the whites: "Grant's education is seen as a threat to Pichot and his fellow patriarchs." (83) The whites hate Grant, this is clear in the way they treat him, because of his education. Gibbson elucidates:

Black male characters attempt to redefine themselves through the act of... writing... Jefferson affirms his manhood and his humanity in general through his journal... Writing and speaking are transformational activities in the text. (42- 43)

The Power of Love Incites a Revolution in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

By the novel's end, Jefferson could change his identity through writing and speaking: he became a man.

According to Gate's theory, Jefferson uses writing as a means of sharing in community. Also, he shows the amount of reason that he enjoys with the help of writing. It is hidden beneath anger, hesitation, lack of self-confidence and fear. He could recognize many things that he never recognized before. The development that happened in his character is greatly fulfilled with the help of writing and of other factors.

3- Jacques Lacan The Names-of-the-Father Theory:

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, both Grant and Jefferson have a rejection to the whites' authorities and control. Grant, indirectly, translates this rejection into defying the whites by helping Jefferson to die like a man, and Jefferson, directly, by dying like a man. According to Lowe:

Gaines aims at presenting a group portrait, one that reveals his community's history... . The 'camcorder narration' often practiced by Gaines, first person, often present tense mode of relation that registers both outer reality and inner thought...(684)

Reflecting Gaines's inner thought, the first person narration uncovers his unconsciousness's conflict. Otherwise, through the novel, Gaines, unconsciously, rejects the whites' past oppression to him.

According to Lacan, Grant, Jefferson and Gaines are Oedipus Complex patients who reject the whites' oppression that represents the symbolic father.

After applying the above theories to the novel, the researcher has a point of view that, he believes, is applicable to the novel: freeing the mind is a first step towards freeing the body. Jefferson's straight walking to the electrocution is the outcome of a previous gradual developing in his character that led to freeing his mind. Jefferson gives all the blacks in the plantation an inspiring example of a free-minded black man, as a result, they start believing in the fact that both freeing their minds and defying the whites are possible. In the future, they may attempt to imitate Jefferson through educating themselves and freeing their minds. Consequently, they will recognize many concepts about life that they never explored before: freedom is more precious than life, manhood can be reached but its price is very high...etc. These concepts and more enable the blacks to recognize the real worth of freedom. Jefferson's

psychological inspiration is only an igniting spark to free the blacks' minds and it is a first step to spark a physical revolution.

Johnson makes it clear that the kind of education that is required to Jefferson must be revolutionary: "Jefferson's education must be... revolutionary, in order to free him from the restrictive social and racial paradigms of the society." (169) This revolutionary education is the kind that is required to the blacks. Johnson's opinion supports the researcher's; the revolutionary education will urge the blacks to resist and revolt against the whites' oppression. The researcher believes that Jefferson's action could be considered revolutionary, on the psychological or the symbolic level, but not on the physical level.

Conclusion

Gaines *A Lesson Before Dying* craftily reflects a real portrait of the blacks' suffering from the whites' oppression in South America in the 1940s. Gaines uses two ironies to let the readers inspect the sides of Grant's character: his passivity and inability to act unless from behind others, Jefferson. Though a passive black man all his past life, Grant, now, becomes a successful teacher who teaches Jefferson the lesson of manhood. Grant uses some means to achieve his task: dialogue, exchanging gifts, writing a diary and the social visits. Finally, Jefferson walks straight to the electrocution like a man. The plot of the novel is well-interwoven, reflecting a detailed image of the unjust execution of a young black male Jefferson and a lesson that he is taught about manhood before he dies. His aunt, Miss Emma, plays the greatest role ever in the novel: she nets the plot by pushing other characters to do as she wishes through manipulation. The power of her love to her son-in-law, the only left relative, is the only motive that moves her. The first person narration helps uncover Gaines point of view and unconscious conflict.

According to Eagleton, Gaines is a true socialist who uses his novel to remove the society's suffering. According to Gate's, Jefferson uses writing as a means of sharing in community. Before he dies, the development that occurred in his character was greatly fulfilled with the help of writing. According to Lacan, all Grant, Jefferson and Gaines are Oedipus complex patients who reject the whites' oppression that represents the symbolic father. According to the researcher, Jefferson's action and its psychological inspiration are igniting sparks to free the blacks' minds. Only free-minded people can lead a revolution. This foretells coming heroic actions that threaten and shake the white patriarchy. Accordingly, Jefferson's action opens the door to revolution which may precede a tangible social change and a change in the balance of power.

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