

The Function of Symbolism in Ernest J. Gaines's

'A Lesson Before Dying'¹

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ABSTRACT

Although Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* writes with meticulous realism, he uses significant symbols as to enhance its theme. The present paper examines the importance and the indication of such symbols especially those represented by Jefferson and Paul, and how they help convey the message of the work, which is considered by many Gaines's masterpiece. From a dehumanized, "hog" to a "Christ-figure", Gaines was able to deconstruct the myth of the white supremacy and reconstruct the black hero. He also uses other symbols that are important as to the development of its protagonist-narrator, Grant Wiggins.

Keywords: Ernest J. Gaines; Symbols; *A Lesson Before Dying*; Novel; African American.

Like Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Ernest J. Gaines wrote his *A Lesson Before Dying* with deceptive simplicity. The novel which Charles R. Larson considers, in his review right after its publication in 1993, "an instant classic" (5), won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize (Carmean 10). Although Gaines has written many notable novels and short stories, *A Lesson Before Dying* is distinguished for the long time he spent in its compilation (seven years) (117), and, for the peculiarity of its protagonist. Gaines wanted to achieve "authorial separation from the novel's first person narrator" (Spangler 107), for he thought that Grant Wiggins, the protagonist and the narrator is "damned close" to him stating that, "I'm having all kinds of problems. He is one of the reasons I'm not working as fast. He's too much like me" (Quoted in Spangler 108). Interestingly, Gaines distances himself from a tradition of black writing because he thinks that they are more interested in content, whereas to him, style is more important. To him, a writer, in order to be successful, must keep a distance:

Gaines specifically criticizes Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* for

privileging content at the expense of form, and he concludes that there is "too much thinking" in the novel and not enough distance between author and protagonist. When authorial distance is lost, a critique Gaines levels against much African American writing, the author becomes a mere "puppeteer" using the novel's characters and narrative events to make rhetorical points, much like a politician would do. (Spangler 107)

Gaines is also usually considered a southern writer. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, he invented his own fictitious Bayonne, a small town in Louisiana "drawn from experience with the texture of reality; this literary place assumes a mythic quality" (Carmean 19). Set in 1948, *A Lesson*, depicts the sufferings of the black American's lives, those working in the plantations, and the racial discrimination and segregation practiced against them. "The period of the late 1940s, a difficult time characterized by postwar economic uncertainty, racial

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tensions in a segregated South where Jim Crow laws prevailed, and a growing Southern resistance to integration and recognizing black civil rights” (Crisu 156).

Gaines is no symbolist, and he tells his story with meticulous realism. However, there is a significant use of symbolism in his novel. As Oakley Hall would have it, “symbols are so commonly employed we hardly notice them” (48). *A Lesson* can be categorized as a Bildungsroman. It focuses on the education of two men: Grant Wiggins and Jefferson. Both are different men by the end of the novel, and the lesson which is supposed to be learned by Jefferson, turns out to be learned more vehemently by Grant himself, who is supposed to be the teacher. Thus the concepts of the teacher/student overlap in the novel. But the story is mainly told from Grant’s point of view, and what he says including the symbols he uses are important to the understanding of his development and transformation into a different man.

When the story begins, Grant finds himself in an unfavorable situation. It is not because a young innocent man in his community, Jefferson, has been convicted to murder and sentenced to death by the electric chair, but because he is asked by Jefferson’s godmother, Miss Emma, to visit him in jail and teach him how to die like a man. Grant is a college-educated teacher of the quarter school and, thus, he is expected to help. Grant, is unsure how can he ever be of any help. To him, nothing can be done, but to Miss Emma and to Reverend Ambrose, Jefferson’s manhood and soul can still be restored. During the trial the, the defense attorney appointed by the court, refers to Jefferson as a “hog,” who couldn’t have planned anything, not mentioning the murder and robbery he has been accused of. He asks the jury to look again and again at that “thing” (Jefferson); that “cornered animal”:

I ask you, I implore, look carefully—do you see a man sitting here? Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand—look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan—can plan—can plan anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa—yes, yes, that he can do—but to plan? ... 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? (*A Lesson* 10)

The image of the “hog” recurs throughout the novel, for what Gaines is aiming to show, and will prove at the end, is the dignity and manhood of black people, and to deconstruct the myth of the superiority of the white man, who look at them as mere animals or half humans.

His [the defense attorney’s] ultimate argument, however, that justice would not be served by killing Jefferson since executing him would be like executing “a hog” not only denies the essential humanity of his client, it equates Jefferson with a domestic animal that generally thrives on scraps, lives in squalor, and is associated with utter uncleanness. The courtroom scene, then, dramatizes and contains the ugly truth of how denial of legal rights and intellectual training have worked to imprison African Americans from their earliest days in this country. (Carmean 118)

Gaines’s choice of the “hog” echoes Claude McKay’s “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. (30)

Everyone of the black community is sure that it is futile to do anything about proving Jefferson’s innocence, but Miss Emma insists, “I don’t want them to kill no hog. I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet.” (*A Lesson* 14)

Another example of this animal image is when Dr. Morgan and Dr. Joseph, the white administrators come to visit the quarter school and begin to inspect the children's teeth and limbs in a demeaning manner. Grant, observing these activities, recalls how previously this was done to slaves and animals, on which he ironically remarks:

At the university I had read about slave masters who had done the same when buying new slaves, and I had read of cattlemen doing it when purchasing horses and cattle. At least Dr. Joseph had graduated to the level where he let the children spread out their own lips, rather than using some kind of crude metal instrument. I appreciated his humanitarianism. (*A Lesson 58*)

The question of how to live like men in such an environment is central to the novel. Dennis Abrams observes that Hemingway was one of Gaines's favorite writers. Like him, Gaines wrote often of the value of "grace under pressure," which is the idea of bravely facing whatever pressures one may endure (87). It is a question of to be or not to be. "Gaines used the story of a crime to explore one of his favorite themes: What does it mean to be a man in a society that tries to keep African-American men from being men?" (86). Philip Auger observes that Gaines, in all of his novels "consistently writes about black men who face the problems of being denied dignity and self-worth found in the status of manhood" (75).

As the novel begins, Grant is, in fact, disgusted by the quarter's conditions. He attributes Jefferson's dilemma to be part of the ignorance of his nation; it is one example of its outcome. Nothing has ever changed for years: same poverty, same ignorance, and same submissiveness. "He realizes, for instance, that the work his students perform for the schoolhouse, chopping wood and other material chores, is the same work they will likely have in the future" (Auger 76). Talking to his girlfriend, he expresses his wish to escape a community which will yield no hope, and where he does not feel he is "living".

I need to go someplace where I can feel I'm living," I said. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life teaching school in a plantation church. I want to be with you, someplace where we could have a choice of things to do. I don't feel alive here. I'm not living here. I know we can do better someplace else. (*A Lesson 30*)

Grant speaks of the quarter in terms of death, and life is to be found outside its confinements. Therefore, his

depictions of the quarter is associated with smoke and gray color, "which symbolizes paralysis, death and entrapment" (Spangler 111). After the trial scene, which Grant does not really attend but hears its details from the members of the community, he relates an average day at school:

We pledged allegiance to the flag. The flag hung limp from a ten-foot bamboo pole in the corner of the white picket fence that surrounded the church. Beyond the flag I could see smoke rising from the chimneys in the quarter, and beyond the houses and chimneys I could hear the tractors harvesting sugarcane in the fields. The sky was ashy gray, and the air chilly enough for a sweater. I told the children to go inside and begin their Bible verses. (*A Lesson 23*)

The gloomy atmosphere of the ashy gray sky is preceded by the presence of the "white picket fence" which surrounds the church which serves as the school for the children as well. Corina Anghel Crisu believes that bringing these two institutions together is to attract the attention to their importance in educating the community. They both are systems of power that discipline either the body or the soul. The church, however, is "imbued by white ideology", and Grant "admits that even his teaching has to follow the imposed white norms meant to "tame" black children by keeping them half-illiterate" (164). This is why, Gaines often describes the church/school as having no solid grounds.

I went around to the back of the church. Like so many country churches, it was wood-framed, long and narrow, with a corrugated tin roof and a bell tower. Years ago, I was told, the church sat flat on the ground. Later, it was set up on wooden blocks. During the thirties, when I was a student here, the wooden blocks, which had rotted over the years, were replaced by bricks. A year or two before I started teaching, Farrell Jarreau and a couple of other men removed the bricks and put in cement blocks. But now even the cement blocks had sunk so low in the ground that a child losing a marble or a ball under the church had a hard time crawling under there to retrieve it. (*A Lesson 248*)

Grant realizes that it is not enough to put one's faith in institutionalized religion which teaches submissiveness and passivity rather than urging community members to make a radical change. "The change that is needed is one in which the foundations for definition, for identity, are subverted" (Auger 77). Grant often describes the atmosphere of the quarter as one of paralysis and barrenness. "...I walked to the road. But there was nothing to see out there ... all there was to see were old gray weather-beaten houses, with smoke rising out of the chimneys and drifting across the corrugated tin roofs" (*A Lesson* 33). Grant's description of the place shows what he thinks and feels towards its inhabitants rather than how it actually looks.

Realizing that religious faith alone is not going to change Jefferson's situation while in prison, Grant resorts to other means. During his first visits to the jail, Jefferson refuses to talk and eat what Miss Emma has cooked for him, but they gradually establish friendship as soon as they begin to talk about such things as ice cream, music and radio programs they both used to listen to as boys. Jefferson asks if his favorite program is still broadcasting, and Grant promises to bring him a radio. The radio proves to be of great help to uplifting Jefferson's spirit. Reverend Ambrose, who is only concerned about Jefferson's soul and salvation would not approve of this, for he considers the radio a "sin box" (*A Lesson* 184), and that Jefferson needs God in his cell, not a radio. But Grant explains that it has brought a key change in his attitude and "The only thing that keeps him from thinking he is not a hog is that radio" (*A Lesson* 186). The radio is a symbol of hope for Jefferson and a reminder that another man cares for him (Fay 93). It is also a wake-up call that awakens in him love and reconnection with his community. The radio becomes a means of exorcising agonies and a source of metaphorical freedom. When Jefferson is allowed to go to the dayroom for meeting Miss Emma and others but that he is not allowed to take his radio with him, he chooses to stay in his cell with the radio rather than go to the dayroom without it.

Perhaps the most significant symbol in the novel is Jefferson himself. He is a symbol of redemption for the entire community. His imprisonment has a great impact on the whole quarter. He stays in prison from Christmas to Easter, and, significantly, is scheduled to die on Friday between 12 to 3 P.M., recalling Good Friday; the time of Jesus's crucifixion. He is an icon of hope, strength and faith. Auger believes that Jefferson's Christ-figure significance has an allegorical dimension to the novel.

The abundance of communal affirmation given to Jefferson gives him symbolic and even iconographic value. The image of

him kneeling to gain forgiveness is an important one for Reverend Ambrose, and the image of him standing with pride upon facing his death is the image his aunt and the whole community want confirmed in the end. (79-80)

In death, he "transcends the injustice that victimized [him] in life, and [he] acquires a heroic status to inspire freedom and to empower others" (Spangler 118). David E. Vancil observes that "redemption is not just an act of acceptance or acknowledgement, but a process in which individuals may ameliorate conditions and improve society" (490). The few words that Jefferson writes in the notebook he receives from Grant, though awkward, speak volumes:

I dreamt it again last night. They was taking me somewhere. I wasn't crying. I wasn't begging. I was just going, going with them. Then I woke up. I couldn't go back to sleep. I didn't want go back to sleep. I didn't want dream no more... If I ain't nothing but a hog, how come they just don't knock me in the head like a hog? Starb me like a hog? ...Man walk on two foots; hogs on four hoofs. (*A Lesson* 225)

The notebook which Grant provides Jefferson with, and which becomes his diary while in prison, is his legacy. He has nothing to leave behind after his death, no wealth nor children, only his words that testify his life and sacrifice. He writes himself into history by jotting down, though in a simple way, his thoughts and feelings as he awaits the execution day, and part of his manhood is restored by his ability of self-expression. Although Gaines's novel is told from a first person perspective, a whole chapter (Chapter 29) is dedicated to Jefferson's diary. It is "the most critical chapter in the novel" (Brown 88), for it enables him to express himself for the first time in his life; to articulate his love for others especially those who stood by him and helped him, his fear of death, and finally his acceptance of his fate with dignity. Thus the "barely literate writings speak eloquently of his humanity" (Vancil 490). His journal is like the Biblical "word" to the black community. Anissa Janine Wardi argues that "the most profound lesson of the narrative" is perhaps "the one which Jefferson teaches to the community: that individual triumphs must precede any meaningful societal change" (194).

Jefferson as a symbol leads to another important symbol in the person of the white deputy at the jail. Paul Bonin is the kind officer who sympathizes with Jefferson and befriends Grant. He speaks to all black people politely and treats them like

his equals. He does not like to inspect Grant on his visits to Jefferson, and lets him know that he is doing so out of his duty as a jail officer. He is even concerned about Miss Emma. He treats the other prisoners kindly and jokes with them. His name has a biblical significance especially to the theme of transformation. In the New Testament, Saul of Tarsus was transformed from a persecutor of Christians to Apostle Paul, a devout Christian (Sanders). He symbolizes hope and the positive change which faith can bring to an individual's life and to the lives of the others. Like his biblical namesake, Paul Bonin is "converted to an understanding that transcends racial limits" (Criso 162), and thus symbolizes the hope for the black people, foreshadowing integration and civil rights.

The transformation of Paul confirms that some "substantial" change can be effected. Although Paul is acknowledged from the beginning as being "from good stock," he is also a representative of white patriarchal law. His change has its greatest value in its symbolic importance: it shows that white patriarchy has not contained this new discourse; instead, white patriarchy is now being changed, not just penetrated. While "practical," "substantial" change still seems remote, the symbolic power in the transformations of the black community and especially of Paul show that the potential for such change is great. (Auger 85)

Paul also bears witness to Jefferson's execution, which Jefferson appreciates being there with him in his last hour. Paul also gives the radio as a gift to Jefferson's fellow inmates in a very humane gesture. It is Paul who comes at the end to hand Grant Jefferson's diary telling him that he has confronted his death with courage and dignity and delivers his last words to his godmother: "Tell Nannan I walked" (*A Lesson 254*). The novel ends when he asks Grant to be friends and they shake hands.

"Allow me to be your friend, Grant Wiggins. I don't ever want to forget this

day. I don't ever want to forget him."

I took his hand. He held mine with both of his.

"I don't know what you're going to say when you go back in there. But tell

them he was the bravest man in that room today. I'm a witness, Grant Wiggins.

Tell them so." (*A Lesson 256*)

With his kindness and humane attitude, Paul's symbolic character is quite different from the stereotypical racist white officer that can be found in other African American fiction.

In the last chapter, just before Paul comes to announce the news of Jefferson's execution, there is a totally different Grant. There is a man who views his world, not in the ashy and gray glasses as he used to do, but what he sees now is a beautiful blue sky. "It was a nice day. Blue sky. Not a cloud. Across the road in the Freemans' yard, I could see a patch of white lilies on either side of the walk that led up to the porch" (*A Lesson 246-247*). The image of the white lilies has a symbolic significance. It is usually connected to the resurrection of Christ, implying the importance and the impact of Jefferson's death on the black community. When Grant wanders restlessly in the quarter, wondering what Jefferson may be doing or feeling on those very moments before he is put to the electric chair, and whether it was "finally over" or not, to his surprise, he sees a yellow butterfly:

...a yellow butterfly with dark specks like ink dots on its wings, not lit there. What had brought it there? There was no odor that I could detect to have attracted it. There were other places where it could have rested—there was the wire fence on either side of the road, there were weeds along both ditches with strong fragrances, there were flowers just a short distance away in Pichot's yard—so why did it light on a hill of bull grass that offered it nothing? I watched it closely, the way it opened its wings and closed them, the way it opened its wings again, fluttered, closed its wings for a second or two, then opened them again and flew away. I watched it fly over the ditch and down into the quarter, I watched it until I could not see it anymore. Yes, I told myself. It is finally over. (*A Lesson 252*)

The yellow butterfly symbolizes the hope and beauty associated with spring and renewal; the yellow color implies enlightenment. "Gaines offer the hope that even in extreme suffering we may find beauty" (Spangler 126).

Through these symbols Gaines shows the gradual transformation of his protagonist, Grant, from

a man feeling entrapped in a community which offers no hope for change or improvement; from a cynical man who thinks himself incapable of restoring Jefferson's manhood, to a compassionate man who is able to *grant*, as his name suggests, the community a hope for change. Before that, he had to exorcise his own inner conflicts, which could easily make him paralyzed like his own teacher, Matthew Antoine, who previously had urged him to escape the plantation. He is no more the "indifferent [person] towards the school children he teaches and the community at large" (Wardi 193), but a teacher who knows what the real mission of a teacher should be. From a dehumanized "hog" to a Christ-figure, as shown in the process of Jefferson's metamorphosis, Gaines was able to deconstruct the myth of white supremacy. He insisted that Jefferson learns this lesson; that "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" (*A Lesson* 195). When Jefferson absorbs the lesson, he starts writing his diary that would "occupy a place of historical significance in the community and serve as a document to help others understand their own lives" (Brown 111).

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