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**THE POWERFUL EXPLORATION OF RACE, INJUSTICE AND RESISTANCE IN ERNEST JAMES GAINES' A LESSON BEFORE DYING (1993)**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores issues that embody truths about life in the late 1940's Louisiana setting of difficult conflicts. The setting of *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest James Gaines indicates an arduous sense of acceptance for injustice due to racial discrimination and a stressed idea of responsibility over this, all attributable to the unavoidable death of bystanders. The paper casts light on the lawyer's strong words, depicting Jefferson as merely nothing more than a common hog during his unjust conviction and imprisonment. They further exemplify the bitterness, racial problems, injustice and prevalent prejudices in the American society. Because of the power of categorization, Jefferson has an immense resentment of the past. Gaines delves into this characterization to reflect the attitude held by the white society toward Blacks, and it positions Jefferson as a symbol for his entire people. By discovering late his own value and defying the implications behind these words, he bears witness to an entire oppressed community. It takes much persuasion for Grant Wiggins to get Jefferson to change. It is Grant's responsibility to teach Jefferson how to change his attitude and gain the courage to stand up and reach salvation. The task that Gaines sets for Grant and Jefferson is to free them from an enslaving myth based on past events. This quest for self-worth is a way to struggle for gaining freedom and break down the chains of racism in a segregationist American society.

**Keywords:** Injustice, Racial Discrimination, Freedom, Salvation, Identity, Racism.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

America, due to a diversity of race groups, is marked by a long history of legally imposed inequalities on the basis of race or national origin. Yet, to gain a deeper understanding of race issues in the United States, we must look back at the era of America's past discrimination and segregation to see why, at this point in time, the historical experiences of African-Americans have been so complex within a prejudiced American society. Actually, Gaines' writing derives from his ability to re-create a sense of place and transport his readers back to life on a Louisiana sugar cane during the pre-civil right era. As far as black Americans are concerned, this era is marked by all forms of segregation and discrimination, as they set out to claim their rights as citizens in a hostile environment that often refused to grant them those rights. As Gaines illustrates in depicting the lives of people in the quarter, many blacks lived in poverty, denied their rights to earn a decent wage by white landowners who kept them in a virtual state of slavery. Therefore, segregation and various kinds of oppression including race and violence pervading the American society. Many blacks risked and sometimes lost their lives in the name of freedom and equality.

As an African-American writer who reveals the problem of a coherent cultural tradition, Gaines has faced the central problem of the African-American Diaspora. This coherent African folk culture is broken up by removal to America. And the possibility of an alternate new world

culture is undermined further by more recent migration out of the South. However, his dreams of escaping the south, perhaps moving back to California or fleeing all connection with particular human communities are replaced by the necessity to remain and change the social conditions of a specific place. Owing to his discovery of the traditional culture as a basis for authority, he appears more hopeful. There is real sense that the components are there to restore order to a culture fragmented by Diaspora. Then, in his effort to reverse the cultural alienation resulting from the Diaspora, Gaines adopts the model of the nineteenth-century realist fiction. This tradition of classic realism, serves Gaines as a model for investigating the historical causes of cultural tradition. Gaines' conception of the history of African-Americans is revealed through his literary works. For example, he feels concerned with the moral fable, and the chronicle of history which are suggested in some of his writing. Actually, his work is related to the evidence of cultural fragmentation that deals with the progressive aesthetic of earlier realist text. So, *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) explores the links between individuals and their social context with the explicit purpose of combating the alienation of a racist society. Gaines is known as a writer working on a classic tradition of social realism. He contributes to an understanding of the historical context of African-American society and envisions progressive change within the black community.

African American literature gives insights into race, injustice and resistance to debunk the dominant white culture. In that vein, Sister Helen Prejean, in *Dead Man Walking* (1991), reflects on the common threads between her experiences. *Dead Man Walking* is an unprecedented look at the human consequences of death penalty and racial prejudices. *I Know Why The Caged Sings* (1994) by Maya Angelou is a depiction of racism, resulting in a quest for love, acceptance and self-worth. According to Nic Stone, the experiences of African American have become central to the reality of the US today. Because of the injustices they have faced, they still cope with their identities and struggles in literature. Stone, in his works, *Dear Martin* (2017) and *Dear Justyce* (2020), gives a representation of young black voices and provides African American children and adolescents with role models to look up to. He delves into the struggles connected to being black in the US and helps in making racism be seen and understood for what it is.

In this work, we use the deconstruction theory, which is a method of literary criticism, helping to unearth new meanings from the text. According to Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is an ultimately political practice and an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought maintains its force. Through his book, *Literary Theory, An Introduction* (1996), Terry Eagleton advocates this revolutionary literary theory Gaines uses, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, to debunk a whole system of political structures and social institutions. This literary criticism consists in producing change that is ultimately a rhetorical act. In Gaines' work, characters are determined to subvert the dominant discursive formations themselves. Only with such foundational change can hogs be redefined. By reversing the white power structure, Grant does understand part of what he and Jefferson have to do. This literary theory of Eagleton helps shape the work of Ernest James Gaines in *A Lesson Before Dying*. This article provides deeper insights into the powerful exploration of race, injustice and resistance in a racist society in America. The reflection investigates the impact of systemic racism on the black community. It also examines the quest for self-worth and the final part gives insight into the struggle for freedom in a segregationist environment.

## 1-The impact of systemic racism on the black community

Ernest James Gaines' literary work explores issues of race relations as a fundamental concern: How can justice prevail in a society dominated by a single group of people? Gaines condemns the society as racist. Grant thus bitterly criticizes his society. He resents the racism of Whites, and he cannot stand to think of Jefferson's unjust conviction and imprisonment. In fact, the outcome of the trial reinforces his pessimistic attitude. He calls into question the wickedness of a system designed to uphold the superiority of one race over another. Therefore, the book is consistently based on a man struck down to the level of a hog by a few words from an attorney. These injustices are infuriating because the black community finds it difficult to stand up and defy them.

Gaines then gives deeper insights into racism that plagues Grant. In that sense, he sets the mistreatment of white people as an example. From Dr Joseph point of view, he advocates that black children are physical laborers and they should be working in the fields as they did when they were slaves. This supremacy of Whites frustrates him because it calls back the hard times of slavery. Thus, Gaines explores the theme of commitment or responsibility that runs through so much of his work. According to him, people should be responsible for themselves, regardless of whether they have four or five months to live. Jefferson's execution serves as an illustration for this idea. He emphasizes this issue of responsibility and insists that each person has to take on this crucial task to benefit his own community. Focusing on this sense of commitment Gaines addresses, we contend that Grant's ability to instigate change within his community derives from this major problem Gaines attempts to reveal. He deals with these kinds of things in his book. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Characters like Grant's school master, Matthews Antoine, influence his life. Yet, he never thinks he will grow up. He has a feeling of hatred towards himself because of the mixture of his blood and the cowardice of his being. And he hates Grant for daily reminding him of it. Despite the explanations of Matthews Antoine, Grant does not understand that his former school teacher feels a sense of guilt. For him, he has left himself and the black community members down because he does not stand up for himself and the unfair things happening in the areas of the black community. This failure leaves him feeling worthless and bitter.

In addition, the big mulatto from poulaya, for all his cynical condemnation of Whites, plays an important role in demeaning racism. According to him, Blacks have but one choice in the South: To run away. His words make it clear as he asserts:

The big mulatto from poulaya had predicted it, hadn't he? It was he, Matthew Antoine, as teacher then, who stood by the wood. He had told us then that most of us would violently, and those who did not would be brought down to the level of beasts. Told us that there was no other choice but to run and run (Gaines 62).

According to the big mulatto, Grant like Mathews Antoine, seeks to want to run away and escape the society he feels will never change. He thinks that society can be changed without being destroyed in the process. The mulatto man expresses concern about the black people. They wish to learn in a society that considers them as subhuman. Yet, he realizes that Grant is able to stand up for what is right. He has the courage to take a stand and help Jefferson on his way. Matthews Antoine also shows Wiggins the importance of self-awareness, the power of sacrifice and the strength of humility. He puts emphasis on education that should be used as a tool to help others. It should bring Grant closer to the people in the quarter instead of isolating

him from them. We could argue that Matthews Antoine, in saying this, tries to save Grant from going through the pain and the remorse that he has undergone.

However, Grant's attempt to flee the south stems from his inability to make things better within his community. Recognizing injustice as crucial issue, he should take up the task of responsibility for his own life, for his relations with other people, and for a role as an educator and agent of change in his community. But at the beginning of the novel, Grant denies that he can help Jefferson. What he can do is to try to keep the other from ending up like this. Before receiving extreme pressure from his aunt to comply, Grant goes so far as to refuse to even attempt to help Jefferson. Even though he recognizes the fact that Jefferson will die in a short while, he does not fail to acknowledge the possibility of working through the injustices to make a difference. He feels a sort of responsibility for his people and the whole black community of Louisiana. That is why he cannot bring himself to leave. Wiggins also makes it a goal to rise above the alienation from his white-dominated society.

Gaines examines Grant's lack of confidence. He has no faith in himself, his society, or his church, he believes something can be done to change things in the black community. At the beginning, he fears committing himself to a fight he cannot win. This defeatist attitude makes him shun responsibility. But in the course of the novel, he learns to accept it as an obligation and commitment he has to fulfill. Being aware of what the black community expects from him, Grant lets go much of the cynicism that holds him back, and starts on a path that will never be made possible without Jefferson. In opposition to Grant's uncommitted perspective, Gaines highlights the importance of belief in a coherent system of human responsibility. He insists on the very basis of responsibility that holds the community together and binds individuals to the community. He also assigns himself the role of educating blacks to the norms of behavior based on an acceptance of social responsibility.

The book also unveils a lesson of social responsibility in the African-American society. Through his literary works, Gaines creates stories, which reflect the ideas of marginalization and the past. In his latest novel *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines continues to assess these ideas. The inescapable past and facing responsibility are clearly represented through the characters of the story, events, and the author's own life. Obviously, the book is about standing tall and being a man in the face of overwhelming adversity. And Gaines' novel is about each individual's responsibility to his community. Only at the insistence of his aunt, does Grant accept his responsibility to teach Jefferson. Outraged by the statement from the defense attorney, she knows, in her heart, that her boy is not a hog. As Emma pleads with Mr. Henry, the sheriff's cousin, she points out: "I need you speak for me, Mr. Henry... I want the teacher visit my boy. I want the teacher make him know he's not a hog, he's a man. I want him know that fore he go to that chair, Mr. Henry" (Gaines 21). Here, Miss Emma asks that Mr. Henry talks to the Sheriff in her favor, hoping that the Sheriff will allow Grant to see Jefferson to show him that he is man. Grant's understanding of the title is that it is his sense of responsibility to teach him to be a man. Despite this, he is at a conflict because he is unsure of how a man should live, let alone die. Knowing that whatever he does will not affect Jefferson's execution. He is worried about the way the community views him.

Yet, he ponders on his own situation as a teacher and the ability to do just such a task. If he fails to do that, how they will treat him. Given the situation, he takes on the crucial role of a teacher in his small community. Nonetheless, he has not resigned the responsibility to support

the community's indigenous system of belief. The task that Gaines sets for Grant and Jefferson is to free them from an enslaving myth based on past events.

Moreover, Gaines brings to light the very basis of the moral obligation that binds individuals to the community. He demonstrates that, from the community's perspective, the knowledge of the teacher must be reliable and comprehensive to the extent that his students look upon him as a guide. Therefore, Grant clearly shows this message of moral obligation to Jefferson. According to him, no matter how bad off Blacks are they owe something to their relatives. Thus, Grant tries to explain the meaning of obligations. Jefferson has an obligation to show his Miss Emma some love when she comes to visit him. She looks to him and see no other than broken people. Yet, the novel reveals that Grant perceives obligation as merely personal, not individual. The black community of Louisiana accuses him of misunderstanding the more universal responsibility of human beings for others outside of an intimate relationship. Consequently, he should embody this sense of moral obligation if he is willing to break the circle of white men. It is arguable that the book is about the nature of the memory Miss Emma has reluctantly taken on. Gaines investigates why it is needed, how it is created and its impact on the individual and the Cajun community itself. So, the memory that is being created through Grant's visit to Jefferson is both personal and cultural. As Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma takes her spiritual responsibilities seriously. She needs the memory of his redemption to bring peace of mind before she dies. Thus, of all the characters, without Jefferson himself, it is Miss Emma who is most distressed by the defense lawyer's portraying him as hog. Like Vivian, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose, Miss Emma is strong and determined with a well-developed sense of obligation, which she uses to convince Grant to impart him this basic moral obligation that he needs as to transform from dehumanization to self-esteem. To conclude, we can take it for granted that it is his duty to assume this sense of responsibility if he wants to gain full acceptance within the Black community and overcome the way White people perceive them.

Ernest J. Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* is an exploration of confronting responsibility in the face of injustice. Various lines in the novel characterize the theme with a general clarity not found elsewhere. A specific quotation drawn from chapter one makes Gaines' message clear. "What justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just put as soon a hog in the electric chair as this" (Gaines 8). Jefferson's defense attorney defines the course of the Novel with these words from chap1. He reduces Jefferson to the level of an animal, stripping him of every shred of human dignity he may have had. Therefore, Jefferson then internalizes these words and begins to act out in a way that ultimately leads to his confrontations and connections with Grant. So, Miss Emma listens to the lawyer's words and realizes that Jefferson will probably take the words seriously. She makes it her last mission in life to make sure he does not die like a hog. Indeed, this characterization reflects the attitude held by the white society toward Blacks, and it positions Jefferson as a symbol for his entire people. When he late discovers his own value and defies the implications behind these words, he does it on behalf of an entire oppressed community. The lawyer's strong words which depict Jefferson as merely nothing more than a common hog only help to further exemplify the bitterness and prejudice which is still extremely prevalent in the American society. After this experience it is obvious as to why Jefferson has immense resentment of the past. Grant Wiggins needs much persuasion to make Jefferson change. It becomes Grant's responsibility to teach Jefferson how to change his attitude and gain the courage to stand and reach salvation. The novel indeed explores themes that embody truths about life in the late 1940's Louisiana setting of difficult conflicts. The setting of the novel indicates an arduous sense of acceptance for injustice due to racial discrimination and a stressed idea of responsibility over this, all

attributable to the unavoidable death of bystanders. The main character has a lot of responsibilities: He wants to reach Jefferson out and makes him know that he is not a hog. It is up to him to give good education to those black children in the school. This is the responsibility he is facing. In this respect, through his meetings and discussions with Grant, Jefferson learns to have pride in him and apprehends the task that has been put upon him.

On the one hand, the initial responsibility he has to fulfil is to make his family happy by going to the electric chair as a strong, proud man. On the other hand, he must show his community that even in times of great misery, the downtrodden must stand all. When Jefferson finally accepts these responsibilities, he succeeds in achieving two goals. The actions of the characters clearly demonstrate how Gaines is able to display emotions of anger and mistrust due to racial prejudice. He also points out how individuals in society stand up and make a difference. Gaines uses the characters of Grant and Jefferson to portray the close connection that exists between people. By centering on this relationship, the novel evolves as each of these characters as well as those around.

Besides, the role of women in *A Lesson Before Dying* is quite significant as they are the foundations of community and family. The reason why the women are so powerful in terms of Grant's helping Jefferson is that they want to see him humanized, rather than compared to a mere animal and with their keen sense of responsibility. They understand that it is necessary for Grant to take on this charge both for the sake of changing his growing bitterness and the representation of the black community in Bayonne. Still, they urge Grant to confront with his responsibilities and recognize the potential power he has within him, if he would only take pride in his community. Emma, Tante Lou, and Vivian play a key role in the black community. Without them, Grant, with his feelings of disgust, would likely spend his life hating everything around him. These women make Grant take the first steps and realize his place in the community forces him to take up the issues of injustice surrounding the eventual execution of Jefferson. He realizes that Jefferson can prove himself and become a great member of his community. Eventually, he understands that without them he would not have learned these lessons and even though it is fair to say that most of the emphasis is put on Grant himself. These women are more symbols of strength than anything else. Grant, who considers himself as a teacher who is taught the final lesson in this book which could not have been learned without Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Vivian's assistance in showing him what good he was capable of.

Characteristically, as Wiggins understands gradually the human need for the moral implications he tries to impart Jefferson. Only at the very end of the book, however, Grant does believe in responsibilities beyond his own needs or feelings. His relationships with Vivian lead to a more earnest commitment to particular human beings. Gaines shows that women can stand strong and take care of the responsibilities as Miss Emma does. It is obvious that Vivian, at this point, lets out of all her feelings and, for that moment, she can be seen as a whole person with fears, doubts, resentment, and yet still love. She becomes attached, more so, to Grant and gains a new sense of trust and respect for him as his relationship with Jefferson moves forward. Besides, it is not Jefferson who is in need for communal support, whoever, in a larger sense, is on a row death. Every human being is mortal and thus exists in need of appeasing and supportive rituals that Gaines explores in *A Lesson Before Dying*. As one has seen, Grant Wiggins's cynicism concerning human potential is similar to Jefferson's despair following his trial. By the way, after Miss Emma's distraught over the impending execution that takes her to her sickbed, a crowd gathers at her house, now managed by Tante Lou. This shows the

universal practice of mankind to express support for Jefferson and his godmother in a way that emphasizes the communal way of life in the black community. The members of the community use clothing to unveil their sense of admiration for an important occasion. Following the complex ruling of a traditional community, human beings take responsibility, to the extent possible, for their own appearance on such occasions. Through the use of such shared signs, a system of communal support and faith is maintained.

As a social realist, Gaines pursues an aesthetic in which character is set in the process of a social history and in which ethical choices are shown to have particular consequences. Given this artistic ideology, Gaines takes the form of a chastisement that gets involved in historical process. In fact, Grant's correction of his students, Tante Lou's correction of Grant, Reverend Ambrose's lecture to Grant, and Jefferson's restoration to dignity are, for instance, images of punishment. They are also related to the prevailing lesson of social responsibility, which itself is corresponding to a recognition of social change depending on black people. Gaines delves into the importance of the social community lies in its power to support one another and convey traditional knowledge. Actually, he contributes to an understanding of the historical context of African-Americans society and foresees progressive change through the members of the black community. Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* is an exploration of Jefferson's gradual assumption of responsibility, under Wiggins' committed mentorship, for assimilating the attributed of manhood before he dies. Grant views this obligation as merely personal and communal. He does understand the much more universal responsibility he has to assume in the black community. Gaines' book does not only examine this sense of responsibility viewed as a commitment or an obligation each person has to fulfill within his community, but it also sheds light on the quest for self-worth considered as a journey of self-discovery.

## 2-The quest for self-worth

From Gaines' perspective, most of his novels often deal with alienation and search of dignity and identity in a racist and hostile environment. Determined that Jefferson will die with dignity, his godmother, Miss Emma, turns to Grant Wiggins, a black teacher at the local plantation school, and asks him to teach Jefferson to be a man. But their first meetings in the jail cell are unpleasant. Because Jefferson himself argues that he has no thoughts or feelings like hogs. This negative depiction by the white attorney denies him of his self-esteem and is also reflected in his words and actions. Although convinced that there is nothing he can do, Grant reluctantly agrees to visit Jefferson in jail. Over the next several months, while Jefferson awaiting execution, he and Grant forge a bond that enables both men to regain their dignity, reconnect with their humanity, and learn the importance of standing. So, a connection is created and they become concerned about their own motives. Indeed, *A Lesson Before Dying* is a novel that explores numerous themes. Gaines reflects the spiritual and personal alienation of human in the twentieth century. Through Grant Wiggin's account of Jefferson's trial at the beginning of the book, one recognizes that something about the main character is out of ordinary. The novel unveils Grant's role in Jefferson's mental and spiritual transformation from a person beaten down by the system, exhibiting apathy and anger, to a man with a sense of passion and purpose, exhibiting dignity and strength.

But at a deeper level, *A Lesson Before Dying* demonstrates the process of an oppressed, dehumanized people's attempt to gain recognition of their human dignity, acknowledgment of their human rights, and freedom to pursue their dreams. By focusing on the African-American view of history, Gaines emphasizes the worth and dignity of Blacks like Jefferson, an uneducated black fielder worker. While laying emphasis on this, Grant, over his visit to the jail

with Miss Emma and Reverend Ambrose, appeals to Jefferson to such an extent that he can make a difference: “I want you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To them, you’re nothing but another nigger- no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong. You can do more than I can ever do” (Gaines 191/192). In this vein, Gaines highlights Jefferson’s sense of self-esteem, which will not only create an atmosphere of hope, but also a fair environment of social justice and equality. According to Grant, the community will remember the execution for a longtime because Jefferson’s final moments will have a powerful impact on many people. All that he expects from Jefferson is to die with dignity. Grant wants Jefferson to prove the white community that he is not an animal, but a worthy man.

Besides, the dayroom is important as the setting for Jefferson’s transformation. In fact, the lesson that he discovers himself and that others learn from him has to do with what is to be a civilized human being. In view of the interactions and connections of the different visits in the dayroom, a sense of dignity is restored. By way of illustration, we remark that everyone can sit around a table and communicate instead of being isolated in Jefferson’s confined cell. Jefferson has experienced the effects of the relationships within the dayroom; therefore, he cries while walking around the room with Grant. In that light, Jefferson gives deeper insights into his sorrows in his notebook when he states:

im sorry I cry mr wigin im sorry  
i cry when you say you aint  
coming back tomoro im strong  
and reven ambros gon be yer  
wit me an mr harry comin  
to an reson I cry cause you  
been so good to me mr wigin  
an nobody aint never been that  
good to me an make me think im  
sombody. (Gaines 232)

Actually, Gaines discloses Jefferson’s knowledge of humanity learned only with the support of Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose. He underlines his last words as to tell Miss Emma that he is going to walk like a man with human dignity. For him, he remarks that no matter how lowly he is, he is still part of the whole. Through this change, there is self-discovery, pride and the breaking of a vicious cycle in the black community.

In Gaines’ work, the language of silence and the concept of food are used as a source of physical and spiritual nourishment helping Jefferson to reconnect with his humanity. Much of the communication between Miss Emma and Henry Pichot, and between Grant and Tante Lou too, takes place through gestures, language and meaningful looks. Obviously, the reaction of Jefferson to his godmother’s food reveals his progress toward accepting his full human nature. Undoubtedly, food in its acquisition and its preparation provides nourishment, but it can be considered as a means by which love is expressed. It is a medium to exert power, an expression of other emotions of acceptance or rejection, and communication of these to others. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines underlines an argument related to Jefferson expressing to Grant a wish to eat vanilla ice cream. From this outlook, Jefferson claims that

I want me a whole gollona ice cream...A whole gallona vanilla ice cream. Eat it with a pot spoon. My last supper. A whole gallona ice cream. Ain’t never had enough ice cream Never had more than a nickel cone. Used to run out in the quarter and hand the ice cream man my nickel, and he give me a little scoop on a cone. But now I’m go’n



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get me a whole gallona. That's what I want-a whole gallona. Eat it with a pot spoon (Gaines 170).

That request casts light on the beginnings of his realization of self-worth. Jefferson never has the opportunity to eat a portion of ice cream in the past. Now he talks about for the first time, and this desire for more includes longing for more respect. This argument marks the first step of his self- discovery.

Gaines uses symbols like the kitchen, which can be taken as the place where meaningful interactions occur around the table. Visitors are entertained with the serving of coffee. Because of this intimate relationship to the ways food is shared by these people, the kitchen is, without doubt, a room of extreme importance in Jefferson's transformation from dehumanization to self-worth. Gaines does not only highlight the types of foods that this culture prepares and shares during meals and gatherings, but also, he underlies clearly the basic significance of foodways as powerful symbols in this culture and his novel.

In their works, *A Lesson Before Lesson* (1993) and *Dead Man walking* (1991), Gaines and Prejean lay emphasis on love, perceived as a force, which has the power to alter, redeem a human life and restore dignity. In fact, Gaines puts stress on food that is often the only means available to the individual to express love or a giving of oneself to others. Food provides pleasure and satisfactions. It can cheer up social relations, enrich spiritual affairs and enhance an individual's sense of well-being. For the sake of argument, Jefferson, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, is depicted as a character who shows much emotions associated with food to communicate with others. Gant understands how important it is to Miss Emma for her godson to eat her food. She suggests that he is supposed to try and that will make him happy. It also contributes to self-pride as it is evidenced through Gaines' book.

Through *Dead Man walking*, Sister Helen Prejean lays foundation for the redemptive power of love. Thanks to the experiences Prejean has gained throughout her life, she becomes a spiritual advisor. And she begins corresponding with a death row inmate known as Patrick Sonnier. On Sonnier's last day, she encourages him to die with words of love instead of hate. According to Patrick, he never knows love in his ordinary life, but he finds it in prison. Thus, his relationship with Prejean becomes a source of strength and courage in the last hours of his life. The love between Sonnier and Prejean helps him to regain his dignity and die with it. There is a belief that each person needs someone to work with him in the way he needs help. This idea emphasizes the similarities that exist between Jefferson and Patrick Sonnier in *Dead Man walking* by Prejean. Both of them need kindness, hugs, laughter and love to relieve themselves from the burden of racism. For Sister Helen, Sonnier is kept down and made worthless and useless. Therefore, he will truly grow up and only know anger. She believes that such a character must be connected and have attachments and interaction with others to survive in this world. From this perspective, Wiggins imparts Jefferson the importance of human dignity. For illustrative purposes, we can say that if Jefferson does not have hope to change his life nor the love, his existence stands for nothing. In the same vein, Sister Helen is a caring person who takes her role as she sees it to serve the poor in Christ's name. She is determined to save Sonnier, not only his soul, but also himself.

*A Lesson Before Dying* by Gaines casts light on the date for Jefferson's execution and his death, which impact on the whole black community of Louisiana. For this reason, Grant resolves to do whatever he can to make his last days as pleasant as possible. Consequently, he develops a sense of determination concerning his mission to help him die like a man. He also recognizes the influence he can have on Jefferson's life, and the importance of the visits he has undertaken to urge Jefferson to incorporate his intellectual teachings and the moral implication of the lesson. He thinks that there is an opportunity to make a profound difference in the life of a

fellow human being; he understands the kinship between himself and Miss Emma's godson. Grant takes steps toward recovering his dignity by voicing and acting upon personal desires. In Gaines' work, symbolism is used for giving a text a meaningful interpretation. The use of the radio is very influential in the restoration of Jefferson's human dignity. Despite bringing about a conflict between Wiggins and Reverend Ambrose as the latter perceives it as a sin box, it has a sinful influence on the evolution of Jefferson. Contrary to what Ambrose thinks of it, the radio underlies a wake-up call for Jefferson that reconnects him with the community. It reawakens in him his love of music and highlights the theme of music's role that provides spiritual sustenance and exorcises suffering. The idea of the radio originates from the conversation Grant and Jefferson concerning "Randy's Record Shop," which is a program both of them listen to as young boys growing up in the quarter. Thus, the main purpose of it, as Gaines reveals it, does not only represent a sense of kinship and connection between the two men, but it also enables them to reconcile with their past.

According to Grant, the radio is viewed as a representation of Jefferson's gradual reconnection with the outside world. From this outlook, Grant states: "that radio is there to help him not think about death. He's locked in that cage like an animal- and what else can he think about but that last day and that last hour? The radio makes it less painful. The only thing that keeps him from thinking he is not a hog is the radio" (Gaines 182/183). Actually, the radio is a form of communication with the rest of the society, and it helps to break down the self-imposed isolation of Jefferson. In fact, he then exiles himself from the world as a way of demonstrating his hatred for everyone outside the cell. When he begins listening to the radio, his bitterness gradually fades away, and he becomes more accessible to human contact. This makes it easier for Grant to gain his trust and eventually teach him about the sense of discovering his self-worth. The radio basically and morally enables Jefferson to forget the impending death. It unveils the implication of Wiggins' moral teaching and its merits of saving his dignity.

Furthermore, the title of the novel is crucial because it results in a deeper understanding of one of the major themes. The entire book sheds light on Grant's attempt to teach Jefferson a lesson. Mainly, Wiggins must himself understand the meaning of his endeavor to show Jefferson how to become a man. There is a proof that the butterfly that appears at the end of the novel exhibits that both of them have reached their goals. Grant makes it clear through his own words while proving: "I probably would not have noticed it at all had a butterfly, a yellow butterfly with dark specks like ink dots on its wings, not lit there. What had brought it there? ...I watched it fly over the ditch and down the quarter, I watched it until I could not see it anymore. Yes, I told myself. It is finally over" (Gaines 251/252). In his declaration, Grant comprehends that Jefferson really does learn a lesson before his death. Obviously, when he says it is finally over, he does not only refer to Jefferson's life, but also his cowardly nature is over. He has once and for all taken a stand for what he believes in. This shows that he has benefited from this entire experience too. As a result, Jefferson's life is sacrificed to a large extent that the white people in the community gain a better understanding of the value of the black members of society. By using such a title in his book, Gaines explores the role of social institutions in producing human dignity and self-worth. He values the redefinition and rehabilitation of identity of the whole black community of Louisiana.

At some stage, the analysis made on Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* and McKay's poem *if we must die* (1919) shows that there is a similar connection between both books while referring to the use of the word hog. They make use of what is called a simile, which helps them to draw a comparison between men and animals. McKay himself begins with this because the reader clearly does not want to identify himself with hogs. He highlights that black people do not want to live nor die like animals. That motivates Grant to help Jefferson reconnect with his humanity.

Claude McKay makes this categorization a matter of conscience to evoke animal imagery. For him, Blacks have become beasts, and they must stand up for their rights. McKay, in his poem, *If We Must Die*, uses such rhetoric clearly to shed light on the difference between the black man's sense of dignity and the animal imagery, dehumanizing him. McKay delves into the dehumanization of the black community when he points out:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us back the mad and hungry  
dogs, Making their mock at our accursed to.

(McKay lines 1-4)

Through these verses, McKay appeals to his fellow kinsmen to reverse the racial problems they still cope with in an American segregationist society. They need to voice out their sufferings and fight against injustice and oppression. Undoubtedly, he admits that African-American men, instead of being passive and treated like animal, deserve equal rights. And they should show pride and dignity even if they have to die. This poem is not only a call to them under basic civil rights and equality, but it also includes universal issues such as respect and dignity. The question of human dignity is central in *A Lesson Before Dying*. As Jefferson has the chance to talk with Grant and learn, he becomes more aware of his humanity full of ideas and thoughts. The search for true identity is at the core of Gaines' novel and McKay's poem.

The lesson Gaines puts forth in *A Lesson Before Dying* is similar to that of Maya Angelou in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. In the course of caged bird, Maya raises against the phenomenon of racism from an inferiority complex to a self-aware individual who responds to racism with dignity and a strong sense of her own identity. Thus, Angelou, in her demonstration of the passage from childhood to young adulthood, uses the Christian myth and presents the theme of death, regeneration and rebirth. Through *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines sheds light on the transformation Jefferson has undergone to subvert racism. The experiences and changes he goes through are compared to Maya Angelou's own experience. Both characters can be understood in the light of dealing with racism. This raising awareness results in a quest for love, acceptance and self-worth.

In her book, the incident which reinforces Maya's identity is her trip to Mexico with her father. It is the first time she has driven a car. Maya is finally in control of her own fate. This experience is central to Maya's growth as well as the incident of homelessness after arguing with her father's girlfriend. For illustrative purposes, we remark that these two incidents give Angelou knowledge of self-determination and confirm her self-worth. Momma teaches Maya and Bailey a strategy of subtle resistance and the dignified course of silent endurance, helping them to maintain their personal dignity and pride. Compared to Momma, Miss Emma goes to great lengths to implore Jefferson to die as a dignified man. That is why Grant, at the insistence of his Aunt Tante Lou, instills a sense of pride and self-worth in him. This demonstrates the commitment of black women who epitomize the values of social changes within the American society. There is a need for them to establish a new cultural identity as soon as possible. Gaines and Maya Angelou attempt to bring to light the ideology of reversing the white supremacy based on myths.

Similarly, other works by Gaines, such as *A Gathering of Old Men* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, address issues associated with manhood and the reassertion of Black masculinity. These novels underscore the redefinition of Black masculinity. *A Gathering of Old Men* is a depiction of a tale related to action and self-realization. The old men who gather at the plantation have spent their days running from trouble. However, after years of social and economic subjugation in a racist system, they stand up for their own rights. Charlie bears

witness to this transformation they intend to fulfil. For instance, Charlie is portrayed as being a naive person, but he goes through a course of changes at the end of the book. He achieves heroic deeds by killing Beau and returning to confess it. He is considered as the most courageous man in the battle.

In the presence of his elders gathered in Mathu's home, Charlie explains that his murdering Beau is an act of self-defense. According to him, there is a needed strategy of self-protection not just from Beau's racist fury, but also from a long history of intimidation he has experienced throughout his life. He candidly reflects on being mistreated by individuals on both sides of the color line, often responding to such ill-treatment with no form of resistance. In that light, Charlie gives his own testimony through these words:

All my life,' Charlie said. Not to Mapes, not to us, but to himself. 'That's all I ever done, all my life, was run from people. From Black, from White; from nigger, from cajun, born. All my life. Made me do what they want me to do, and 'bused me if I did it right, and 'bused me if I did it wrong—all my life. And I took it. I'm fifty now. Fifty years of 'busing. All my natural-born black life I took the 'busing and never hit back (Gaines 188/189).

This statement unveils the problem of Charlie's self-realization of the burden of racism half a hundred years old. The great importance is to stand up for himself as a human being. Charlie's retaliation derives from Beau exchanging the stalk cane for a gun and Mathu forcing him to bear arms in his own defense. In this respect, Charlie kills Beau, and in the process, he commits the first self-affirming act of his life. Enacting violence teaches Charlie the importance of recognizing his human value. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Charlie's attempting to redefine his sense of self-worth inspires the old men to look for a similar transformation. They demonstrate their strong selves by coming to help Mathu. At the end of the book, all of these men have reaffirmed their manhood and humanity. This is even the same problem that Grant and Miss Emma face to redefine Jefferson from dehumanization by the white dominant culture to a new identity. Within the scope of this problem, Gaines unveils the roles of social institutions such as education and law because they all have a part in producing human dignity and self-worth. Rilla Askew's *Fire in Beulah* (2001) provides deeper insights into events dealing with both a systemic and individual threat to the dignity of an African-American character. In Gaines' story, the successful transformation of Jefferson is similar to the dignity displayed in Askew's character Graceful, who refuses to submit herself to the pitying bribes of her workers. In fact, she regains her self-worth not only by laboring in silence as a protest against a system, which attempts to control and define her. She endures the economic necessity of domestic labor under the rueful guise of her racist bosses. She refuses to capitulate to the condescending attitude of her employers too. Owing to her protest, her employers eventually resort to begging Graceful to return to work for them, offering her well above the going rate of remuneration.

By the same token, Graceful, in her own individual way, achieves and retains subjectivity by refusing to submit willingly to her oppressors despite her situation. One could argue that Graceful is the protagonist of the novel, but it is her purposeful single-mindedness to which Althea must consistently adjust. Therefore, a plausible contention could be offered that the story is for Graceful. As determiner of her own world and thus of her extended family and of her white employers, she embodies the pride of a black community that refuses to dignify a Jim Crow system. The gracefulness of Askew's character is readily contrasted to the clumsy, inept qualities so evident in Althea. In this respect, Graceful is determined to be subject, not object within her immediate context although she must continue to be reflexive, adjusting to the whims of white power domination. Finally, it is Althea who needs a new understanding of race and culture.

Through *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines explores the case of Black men who face the problems of dignity and self-worth found in the status of manhood. Likewise, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) addresses the same issue. The novel explores the notion of manhood. In that sense, the four sections of the book follow roughly the lives of four men. All of the Black men struggle to reassert their masculinity. For example, Joe Pittman conquers horses as a means to prove his worth. As for Ned Douglass, he openly sacrifices himself for a social order and becomes a school teacher and teaches about race relations. Jimmy Aaron then is defiant by organizing political protests. All of these brave black men meet their death through struggling for manhood, for the richness of their lives make their efforts worthwhile. Gaines advances, through these characters, a vision of self-determination and social uplift for African Americans. The notebook, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, bears witness to Jefferson's reconnection with his humanity. It is a kind of reconciliation with the whole black community through Grant. As he delves into his thoughts, he thinks about his position in an unjust world and begins to ponder over his own life. By the way, the diary casts light on Jefferson's own experience during his evolution. He writes in it as though he dedicates a letter to Wiggins. When he expresses his feelings, he realizes how important he becomes to his community. On the one hand, focusing on the production and inspiration of Jefferson, Gaines discloses that the uneducated can possess intelligence and nobility. He has abilities and skills to create something of his own. This creative genius makes of him a man thinking. He possesses the power to create original thoughts that is the proof of a divine. In spite of the misspellings of the diary, its message is clear and meaningful. Then, this act of creativity reverses the image of a hog and leads to an important behavioral development. Through it, he underlines his self-expression and communication with Grant, Miss Emma, and all those who try to help him. On the other hand, the diary is a way of reinforcing Grant's self-confidence and self-worth, for he initiates the use of the notebook to commit Jefferson to writing. From the perspective of the black community, the knowledge of the teacher must be reliable and comprehensible. However, he does not fail this high standard set by the community; he embodies the moral education, resulting in Jefferson's own strength. He faces his death with almost superhuman calm and understanding. Gaines, by focusing on the term hog, gives deeper insights into the development of a feeble man unable to save himself but gain strength to claim his own voice at the end of the novel. In his diary, the reader begins to understand Jefferson's own fate and the reversal of prejudices from white people. According to him, no one is born with low self-esteem. It derives from over thinking and being afraid of how a person is viewed by others. He adds that he does not have low self-esteem by the time he is with people he knows. For this reason, Grant's transformation involves the incorporation of values he installs in the life of Jefferson. Then, the two men forge a bond as they both realize the importance of resistance and defiance against the white myths. Jefferson becomes conscious that he is as much a man as any human being. He addresses these issues in his diary, perceived as an appeal to the whole black community of Louisiana. From this outlook, he points out:

good by mr Wiggin tell them  
im strong tell them im a man good  
By mr wigin im gon ax paul if he  
can bring you this. (Gaines 234)

In his declaration, Jefferson makes his Farewells to Grant, helping to find his own identify by giving him a voice to be heard. He evokes his life and the meaning of death to his people. Grant seeks to bolster the black community by telling them that Jefferson dies as a strong and brave man. He expresses his last words to the man who helps him change. They form friendship through a journey of mutual self-discovery in which each acclaims his identity and dignity as

a human being. He uses, in his diary, tender words to show a great affection for Grant. Wiggins also learns about reciprocating affection from Vivian, his family, Jefferson and the community.

Jefferson's diary reveals that people who show no concern for him during his life are trying to make him comfortable right before death. None of these people ever care for him before he is sentenced to death. However, by teaching Jefferson, Grant learns a lot of life lessons from him. By the way, the reason why he changes does not affect himself, but also the whole community. It is difficult to think that the death of this man is necessary for a change to occur throughout this oppressed community. This is a path towards self-discovery, pride and the debunking of the White men's vicious cycle. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines lays foundation for a sense of awareness of the moral and intellectual implication of resistance, leading to the transformation of a man from dehumanization to self-worth. Jefferson's self-realization helps him find a new identity. The book is about a dehumanized man's struggle and development into manhood. It investigates the notion of responsibility and the quest for self-worth as universal issues.

### 3-The Struggle for freedom

*A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines is a depiction of personal freedom, happiness and hope for uplifting the whole black community. In fact, the reader is given a unique outlook on the status of African-Americans in the South, after World War II and before the Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, we see a Jim Crow south through the eyes of an educated African-American who often feels helpless and alienated from his own country. In Gaines' book, Grant is the only educated black man in the area and the only member of the black community who might be free when he overcomes oppression. Gaines, in his work, emphasizes human freedom and choice up against injustice. This is what Grant is searching for, nevertheless, his life and career are very limited, and he must refer to the white authority figures as "sir". Because of this, he yearns to leave the disheartening situation he is in. Grant feels that he is cornered by forces: his aunt's incessant wants, pressure to conform to a fundamentalist religion he does not believe in, the children's need for a teacher, and the community's need for leadership. Grant brings himself to carry these burdens for multiple reasons. He wants his personal freedom, happiness, and hope in the idea of progress, and the fear of failing the black community. These feelings are developed during the years of white oppression as well as Blacks who have suffered from that oppression only to pass it onto the next generation. As such, Grant becomes very pessimistic towards the idea of helping others. Yet, he wants his own needs fulfilled. Grant is assigned the task of setting the black community free from oppression and he becomes hopeful and proud of this vocation. He finds motivation to help Jefferson, a black man falsely convicted of murder. Grant's relationships with Jefferson are the best indicator of this attitude. To a great extent, Jefferson takes Grant as a model. Both characters have basically defied and challenged the white racism and oppression as a changeable part of life. They respond with optimism and defiance instead of hopelessness and apathy. As the novel progresses, Grant becomes aware of Jefferson's sacrifice for his community and the ability to make a difference. They undergo a transformation through their interaction with each other. Both of them finally forge a bond of freedom as they understand the simple heroism of resisting and defying the expected.

Besides, Gaines' novel investigates the theme of freedom as a state of mind. Thus, Grant and Jefferson are incarcerated in a kind of prison. Steel bars surround Jefferson, but Grant is confined by racism, self-obsession and distrust. He believes himself caught in a dilemma where he must choose between fleeing the south and staying to be broken down by the prejudice into

a beast. He also feels trapped in a job that he hates, believing that he can never make a difference in any of his student's lives. Despite his education, he does not dare act as an educated in front of white people. His station requires him to seek the approval of men who disgust him, men like Dr. Joseph and Sheriff Guidry, and he finally hates himself. And then, Jefferson is freer than Grant despite his jail cell accommodations. Since he has already been sentenced to die, he has nothing to lose and fear. They cannot punish him any worse than they already have. So, he is free to act the way he wants.

Moreover, Jefferson is free of the expectations that constantly burden Grant. The bar is set so low for Jefferson that anything above hog life behavior would surprise everyone. For this reason, he shows bravery during his execution, which has such a profound effect. Both of them are initially trapped by their fatalistic world view. They believe there is nothing they can do to change things. According to Grant, Jefferson acts and goes heroically to the chair. He realizes he can also make changes and defy what is expected from him. In that light, their mentality can be freed from prejudices and oppression. That in this context he says that "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" (Gaines 251). Actually, Gaines casts light on physical freedom that does exist if only the mind is free. Grant expresses the complicated human emotions and struggles with the path of his life to breathe the freedom he longs for. Grant and Jefferson are actually concerned with breaking the black community out of racism. They realize that setting them free enable them to forge a bond of freedom. In short, *A Lesson Before Dying* is a story about freedom as it deals with physical and mental freedom for both Grant and Jefferson and the whole black community of Louisiana.

*A Lesson Before Dying* takes the same feature as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), for they deal with the theme of freedom. It can be defined as the capacity to exercise choice and free will. The necessary components of freedom are liberty, free will and independence, and they are an essential part of daily life. In Twain's novel, the narrator, Huck, seeks freedom from society. It seems that freedom is not slavery. Twain's book is a depiction of Jim, Ms. Watson's slave, who runs away to escape being sold and having his family separated. In the beginning, he has no freedom or choices and is sold to do something and must do it without any questions. Even when Jim escapes and meets Huck on the Island, he is still required to hide and avoid all contact with anyone. Yet, with the help of Huck, they struggle and risk their lives for freedom. Regarding the slaves, freedom is nothing but a long fight that some never win. Both Huck and Jim escape from harsh treatments society imposes on them. Mark Twain's novel investigates the theme of freedom as it sheds light on the personal growth and change of Huck and Jim. And then their journey becomes a quest for Huck's inner freedom and Jim's literal freedom. *A Lesson Before Dying* also unveils acknowledgement of Jefferson and Grant's human rights, and freedom to pursue their dreams. He and Grant forge a bond that enables both men to regain their dignity. We have the impression that throughout the works of Gaines and Twain the impossibility of liberating oneself from the supremacy of whites one is caught can only be made possible by connection with others. Their texts underline the ethics of the concern of the self in which one's formation is connected with one's relationships to others. We understand that human freedom is expressed in the actions individuals perform in response to others and the world. For illustrative purposes, we contend that Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Grant and Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying* find freedom with the help of others and their interaction with them. This freedom, in spite of the imprisoning conditions, is thus achieved only through intense self-examination and dialogue with others.

By helping Jefferson to reconnect with his humanity, Grant realizes that this task is about the ways in which the imprisoned may find freedom even in time of despair. In fact, Jefferson has promoted and stopped the troubles of the black community. At the end of the novel, he knows that his refusal to bow down to his final moments honors his community. Twain provides a clear social commentary about the immorality of slavery when he ends the novel with Jim becoming a free man. For Huck and Jim, the river represents freedom. Once reflective of absolute freedom, the river soon becomes a sort term escape, and the novel concludes on the safety of dry land where Huck and Jim find their freedom. Huck resolves to steal Jim, freeing him from the bonds of slavery, which is an honorable act. The three novels investigate issues associated with the journey towards freedom.

More importantly, Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* gives deeper insights into the struggle of Grant and Jefferson, trying to break down the shackles of racial segregation. They bear the name of black freedom. Compared to these two characters, Proctor in *Three Men*, the center story in *Bloodline* makes the decision to stand tall and serves his time in jail while saying: "...cried and cried and cried" (Gaines 151). Here, Proctor unveils his emotional breakdown that is critical on two levels: It departs from his earlier to cry, and it signals that he is ready to move forward and claim ownership of his actions. Even though his freedom is physically restricted, he is psychologically liberated. Proctor's cries bears witness to the power and control are necessary for his continuing evolvment and maturity. In that light, he understands that his resolute actions can make an impact while he still ponders over his decision: "what was I going to do when Medlow came? Was I going to change my mind and go with him? And if I didn't go with Meldow, I surely had to go with T.J. and his boys. Was I going to be able to take the beating night after night?... [w]as I going to be able to take it? (Gaines 155) Actually, Proctor is in a position to impart wisdom in the manner that it has been passed to him. His incarceration becomes the force that leads to his psychological freedom. Behind bars, he stands tall, admits his faults, and confronts his fears. For him, the price of freedom on someone else's terms is greater than the cost of his incarceration on his own.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant delivers an impassionate discourse on the legacy of slavery and its effect on black men. In a system that fails to meet their cultural and psychological needs, they are left spiritually, economically and morally bankrupt. As Grant continues to fight for his psychological freedom, he claims:

we black men have failed to protect our women since the time of slavery. We stay here in the south and are broken, or we run away and leave them alone to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious circle – which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and maybe even tries to change it, it is too heavy burden because of all the others who have run and left their burdens behind. So he, too, must run away if he is to hold on to his sanity and have a life of his own (Gaines 167).

In this outlook, Grant explains the flight theory to Vivian and understands, at that precise moment, the depth and the importance of appointment as the one chosen to make a difference within the black community. His relationship with Vivian makes him confident to acknowledge his own intellectual weakness. Even if Grant is a victim of the environment as much as Jefferson, it is up to Jefferson to reverse the cycle of victimization. According to Grant, Jefferson can do this, if he frees himself from the psychological shackles of oppression, he embodies the struggles one acquires through his experiences. Despite confinement in his



prison, he succeeds in finding social freedom and sets the whole black community from bondage.

Gaines gives the impression that *A Lesson Before Dying* is a revelation of human freedom and choice up against great injustice. He also feels concerned about what African-Americans have always done under oppression. In this respect, the emphasis is laid on a particular community, along with two black men who struggle for freedom and dignity. Living in a confined environment symbolizes the absence of freedom, which allows them to understand the importance of freedom. In this novel, Gaines also defines freedom by confining and binding us, not just in space, but in time. For this reason, Grant asks when things will change, indicating the slow movement of change in the south. Through Gaines' characters such as Grant and Jefferson, we witness birth, death, and resurrection, a repetition and movement that construct freedom. This freedom is not the fleeing that Wiggins, at first, desires. To flee is not to have any boundaries; such a situation is not human. It means a life without true contact with other and without any form in which to express the self. All this generates changes within the multiple confined spaces in which Jefferson and Grant are imprisoned. However, Grant finally chooses to remain as a free man.

There is not the slightest doubt that the atmosphere of transformation of Jefferson occurs in the jail cell. The confinement of the narrative itself to this space and to the time of the holy season creates an intersection between politics and religion. It emphasizes Gaines' understanding of creative or redemptive suffering. Gaines highlights that change comes at a price. From this reflection, he tells Wolfgang Iser in an interview published in MELUS: "You do suffer; you have to suffer in order to make any change, especially when you have something so ingrained as racism and over so many years, in order to have any change at all. And it has to begin with one person, and others will follow. It's usually one person that must be willing to pay a big price to make this change" (Iser 7). According to Gaines, the struggle for freedom comes through creative suffering. One becomes responsible for others and generates rootedness that is a creative and committed confinement meaning a living for others that is true freedom. For Gaines, rootedness is the power to stay in place and creates the change that makes a future possible. Jefferson and Grant have made all the difference in the south, staying there, fighting, and dying. They paved away their way for freedom.

Similarly, James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) examines the treacherous escape route through which black people have the potential to relocate to another country of representation. In his book, Baldwin explores the complex relationships individuals have with their environment, each other, and themselves. He also evokes the constellation of issues plaguing black males who are trapped in the lenses by others. It does not only represent the destruction of black man, but also a solution to the problems black people are confronted with. By way of illustration, we can say that this is the escape path to another place that Rufus imagines before he commits suicide. In this place, he can be released from the suffocating narrow confines of black masculinity and acquires space to live, breathe and flourish.

Through *Another Country*, Baldwin unlocks the potential for escaping the imprisonment of black masculinity while traversing a new country of black male representation. This place, this other country that Baldwin begins to establish in his book, is his solution for replacing the confining constructs of society with a broader place to roam, space to breathe. Baldwin's endeavor is to locate, or if necessary to forge, a place for the black, the impoverished and the oppressed where they can enjoy freedom. Establishing another country where freedom is

possible accounts for the importance and power of escape. This escape cannot be affected through a bitter railing against the cage. Yet, it can be achieved by destroying the cage, or at least, by redefining the boundaries of it to make space for a self-constructed image beyond mere categorization. It seems to us that the texts of Gaines and Baldwin deal with the struggle for freedom.

We could argue that the broad cultural history of blues, specifically the folk philosophy does not only inspire Baldwin's escape from the image white society has of him, but also his attempt for escape in *Another Country*. In fact, blues music is essential because it allows the listener to hear himself and bear the burden. As a philosophy, the blues emphasizes overcoming adversity rather than wallowing in despair. This most basic idea leads Grant to buy a radio for Jefferson because the blues music is deeply rooted in personal experience. It can enable the listener to come to terms with the prejudices of the past and acquire a new identity. However, the blues performer must share his song and it must be received by the community. By sharing and receiving of experience is the only escape from the imprisonment of misrepresentation because it requires a man to express himself in his own terms and for the self to be received. For instance, listening to Bessie Smith records, Baldwin hears himself and recognizes that the process of locating his origins is a cadence, and thus intimately ties to the dynamics of the blues. All this kind of things helps blacks to set themselves free from the confining walls of white society's structures.

There is no denying that Maya Angelou's poem *Caged Bird* (1994) is metaphorical in aspect, the caged bird represents the black man and the bars of cage being symbolic of his struggles against white supremacy. Angelou's work is a portrayal of a bird, which is throwing itself against the bars of its cage. It struggles so much that it begins to bleed and needs to sop, but once its wounds are healed, it tries again. It is persistent little guy. And in the final stanza, this tough nugget sings a prayer, wishing to be free. But no matter how many times these forces push against her, she continues to fight back. So, if Maya is the bird and these things are her cages, her poem is nothing but a revelation of the sufferings she has experienced since her childhood. By expressing her feelings is Maya's only way of escaping. In that light, she writes a poem of her own titled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which can give us insight into what the caged bird means for her. She shows her feelings in the last stanza:

The caged bird sings  
With a fearful trill  
Of things unknown  
But longed for till  
And his tune is heard  
On the distant hill  
For the caged bird  
Sings of freedom (Angelou, lines 30-37).

Through these lines, we learn that the bird is not only caged, but also its wings are clipped, and its feet are tied so it can barely move. While the free bird gets to fly around looking at all the awesome things life has to offer while the caged bird stands on the grave of dreams. Being free means to cast off one's chains, the caged bird rages and fights because it seems to remember the meaning of freedom. Angelou's bird has never been free. Therefore, it still sings a song of freedom.

Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* and Angelou's poem *the Caged Bird* share in common the struggle for freedom in a confining environment that often denies it of them. Similar to the caged bird, Jefferson is locked in a cell jail there is nowhere to find a path leading to freedom he longs for. Only by breaking these chains they will have chance to set themselves free from all this form of segregation and discrimination of white men. Maya Angelou's poem can also be considered as an appeal to the people of Stamps because these folks do not know what it is like to be free. They cannot imagine it, but on Sunday mornings and when listening to the fight on the radio, they hope and sing a song of freedom. At first, Maya does not even know what freedom is, but she understands that her life is not the one she wants. So, she does what she can, singing her song. And at the end of her poem, she points out what the issue of freedom means to her.

Similarly, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte explores issues of women's freedom. Jane Eyre is an interesting insight into the role and position of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century society. As a governess, Jane is on a different social scale than the ordinary servants, yet she is excluded from mixing with the upper classes. She is also known as a strong-willed person who is capable of deep affections and some stubbornness. What makes her interesting is her fight against the social conventions of the day to gain respect and acceptance from society. Contrary to her, women of her social standing are not supposed to have strong and determined characteristics. During her time in Thornfield, Jane makes some valuable comments on the expectations that society has on women at the time. It is widely acknowledged that Bronte's ideas on women are ahead of their time. It is unusual for a woman of Jane's social standing to experience such profound liberation when she falls in love with Rochester. We also witness her courage in refusing the temptation to elope when she discovers that Rochester has already a wife. Her moral integrity and strength of character are admirable. Along with Jane, Helen Burns represents a different type of woman. She is not as liberated as Jane and possesses a strong capacity for endurance that she has initial difficulties appreciating. Yet, it is through Helen that Jane learns patience and the importance of charity and forgiveness. For instance, through her teachings of Burn, she recognizes the liberating virtues of goodness and self-sacrifice. In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte reveals how true human freedom does not come through wealth and social standing, but rather through strength of character and moral integrity. Considering all these things, we can say that wealth and social standing are not necessarily compatible with goodness and virtue. It is through moral strength and natural goodness that women can be true to themselves and gain respect of those around them. In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, the women who possess the wealth to be freed are, in fact, prisoners of the class structure. Despite being a female character, her situation is comparable to that of women in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Thanks to the help of Miss Emma and Tante Lou, Jefferson is able to reinvent himself and proves to be an example of humanity for both the black and the white characters. In this respect, he appears as a symbolic person whose emancipator movement from physical bondage to spiritual liberation takes place within an environment prevailed by all form of segregation and discrimination.

While focusing on the writings of both Bronte and Gaines, we can say that this analysis underlines the interrelation between the domains of ethics and freedom, which become essential in reconstructing black manhood. This helps to tackle the notion of the white dominant discourse and shake the unequal opportunities of the white educational institutions. For this reason, Gaines sheds light on the issue of manhood and human freedom. He tries to bring to

light this problem while highlighting Grant and Jefferson's endeavor to set the whole black community of Louisiana free from the roots of slavery.

Furthermore, Gaines, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, argues that blacks' struggle for freedom is a way of breaking through the cages of categorization. So, within the walls of his prison cell, Jefferson must break down the barriers of his psychological imprisonment. Being incarcerated in the jail town and awaiting for his death sentence, he cannot break free of his cell, but he can overcome his figurative imprisonment. He needs not only to escape the image of the hog, but also the historical misidentification of blackness as criminality. This cage and its boundaries are subject to the whims of the White law. It is up to him to chip away all this kind of things. Grant embodies his own responsibility because there is a choice in self. From this outlook, he asserts: "and that's all we are, Jefferson, all of us on this earth, a piece of drifting wood, until we –each one of us, individually – decide to become something else" (Gaines 193).

Here, everyone has equal agency in deciding who they will become. This freedom, however, helps cope with the difficulties African-Americans have gone through during the 1940's. Only by excavating the past that Jefferson and Grant can recognize the non-depiction of society and begin the process of escape. They rely on this philosophy, which overcomes the adversity rather than wallow in despair. They take the first steps to another country of representation, meaning freedom.

Despite being a white man, Paul Bonin treats Grant and Jefferson as human and friends. This attitude of the white depute toward them shows a glimmer of hope that these confining cages are to be broken down. He makes it clear that he sees the transformation. Even though this confining masculinity may not immediately be destroyed in the minds and eyes of all white men, Jefferson changes it in his heart with the help of Grant redefining him. It is the breaking down of these walls around them that can set the whole black community free. By way of illustration, we can say that Grant and Jefferson also recognize the importance of sharing and bearing witness to their experiences as men on the path to freedom. However, women like Miss Emma and Tante Lou are the catalysts of their connection and help them to forge a bond at the very end of the novel. In Gaines' book, Grant wants Jefferson to reverse the confining walls of society's structures. After Jefferson's death, the carrying forth of this new reality towards freedom is up to the living while Grant's future is left open. According to Gaines, Wiggins will carry the torch Jefferson lit into the classroom and guide his students to find freedom. Grant's major role is to share the experience, peel away the myths perpetuated by his nation's forefathers and encourage his students to take root rather than flight. By instilling these things in them, they may reverse the vicious cycle and construct their images in a new light that will illuminate the way to another country of representation where they can breathe freedom. Ernest Hemingway refers to it as a Grace under pressure.

Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* portrays the struggles African-Americans acquire through heroic deeds in a confining white society. In this case, the greatest thing is to make a difference within the black community. We have the impression that Grant and Jefferson whose life symbolizes the struggle for freedom is regarded as the final lesson that urges them to forge a bond, uplifting the whole black community of Louisiana. Ernest J. Gaines addresses these racial problems while drawing on the earlier struggles of the civil rights movement. Many black figures who belong to this movement feel concerned about the same problem as Gaines does. Their struggles are not only based on race equality under the laws, but also, they address universal issues related to freedom, dignity and equal opportunities. They have to be relieved

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from the burden of slavery, fight against racism and all kind of oppressions and reverse the enslaving myth based on racial prejudices.

## 2. CONCLUSION

Gaines creates a fictional world representative of human experience. In his work, he addresses issues related to a community's triumphs, defeats and weaknesses. They are the thematic elements that govern his work and give it a unifying setting and a significant larger of social realism. His stories give voice to individuals long silenced by racial oppression. Ernest J. Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* portrays the difficulties African-Americans face in the rural south of Louisiana. Gaines evokes this problem in a way that leads him to highlight a moral lesson in his novel. *A Lesson Before Dying* is not only an exploration of a man's plight, but also a nature of humanity and dignity of mankind. In his novel, he depicts a picture of a man who is frustrated with the domination of white men. He gives the impression that the central themes that occupy his work are personal responsibility, dignity and courage. In fact, in restoring Jefferson's status as a worthy member of the society, Grant focuses, in particular, on the importance of his role in the black community. He has taken on his responsibility as an obligation and commitment within his community. As we see it, responsibility can be defined as a process of fulfilling an obligation that helps Grant to restore Jefferson's humanity. Both characters have not, basically, given up and accepted racism and oppression as an unchangeable part of life. The responsibility Grant has undertaken results in Jefferson's mental and spiritual transformation from dehumanization to a man with a sense of respect and self-worth. Grant has overcome Jefferson's dehumanized existence and gains his hope in humanity and his faith in his own ability to make a difference. Gaines demonstrates the extent to which both characters have undergone a transformation through their interaction with each other.

Through *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines sheds light on the resistance and struggle for freedom. The most important aspect that emerges from the book is the redefinition of Jefferson from the status of a hog to a man. In that light, African-Americans reverse the white dominant culture with all its form of segregation and discrimination within the American society. Drawing on the deconstruction theory, Eagleton highlights this subversion of the white power structure. Considering all these things, we can say that characters like Jefferson, Grant, Miss Emma, Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose bear witness to this change thanks to their struggles to gain basic civil rights and equality within a racist American society. As an African American writer, Ernest Gaines' aesthetic dimension is based on the period of classic nineteenth century realism. Counted among the most significant southern writers of the past half century, Gaines has based his fictional work on the African American culture and traditions of rural southern Louisiana. With authentic dialects and convincing characterization, he has written first-person narrative that chronicles the sufferings and struggles of black protagonists who possess a strong attachment to their society. Finally, the style of his novel is associated with the use of symbols such as hog, food, the chair and the notebook, giving the book its richness and meaning. Gaines' realist ideology, in some way, is the severe simplicity of his style.

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