

A Lesson Before Dying or a Lesson for Living?

How One Nine-Page Chapter, in Ernest J. Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*, Connected the

Lines Between Life, Death,

and Everything in Between

by

Samantha Rincon

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Keith Miller, Chair
Mark Lussier
Claudia Sadowski-Smith

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the nine-page diary present in Ernest J. Gaines', *A Lesson Before Dying*. The diary is the only real form of communication from Jefferson, a young African American man who was sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit. After being stripped of his manhood while on trial, it became a group effort to assist this man in regaining his manhood. In this thesis, the diary became the topic of focus and was examined to see why it had such an important role in the novel. Separated into three chapters, each looking at specific moments and people that helped the diary come to fruition. The first chapter focuses on key moments that helped influence the diary. The second chapter focuses specifically on the content of the diary and dissects the entries. Lastly, the third chapter focuses on the effects of the diary not on the main character but to those involved in his journey. Thus, the thesis becomes centered on answering why a nine-page chapter in the African American Vernacular English uncovered one's manhood and ultimately defines his journey to death.

DEDICATION

I would like to thank my parents, who have supported all of my academic endeavors and have been by my side through it all. I would like to dedicate my thesis to my cousin, Gabriel who spent a month in the hospital but is now at home on his way to a full recovery.

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CHAPTER 1

PRE-DIARY

The diary present in Ernest J. Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*, has been recognized as an important piece that really holds the novel together but very little has actually been analyzed. Many critics have noted its importance but very few have taken the time to dissect the context of the nine-page chapter that plays a crucial role in the novel. Anne Gray Brown really broke down the diary and acknowledged the growth that took place within Jefferson, the main character of the novel, throughout his personal narrative present in the diary. Brown saw a great amount of importance proclaiming that at nine-pages, the diary was the most compact chapter in the novel. She also really looked at what Jefferson was capable of doing with the diary, "Jefferson uses words to acknowledge his humanity, reconstruct his identity, and position himself as a community hero." In many ways, Brown took a deep dive into reading in between the lines of the diary. Yet, the in-depth analysis of the diary was not always an easy find, many other articles like those of Jeffrey Folk acknowledged its importance but did not take the time to dissect Jefferson's thoughts and feelings. Residing in chapter twenty-nine, the diary is the only portion of the novel that allows the reader an uninterrupted interaction with Jefferson. The diary is important because it gave Jefferson the voice he was stripped of the moment he was sentenced to death for his unfortunate lack of judgement. Throughout the novel, Jefferson was very closed off and was dealing with defeat. Most of the interactions involving him had very little talking on his end but the diary allowed him to let his guard down and really take advantage of the opportunity to express himself. The ability to write in such an informal yet powerful way assisted him in transforming into

the person that his godmother believed he truly was. Not only was Jefferson proving that just because you are incarcerated does not mean that your voice and feelings go away but he was also challenging his views of himself. Through his diary, not only are we getting a picture of who Jefferson was but also a breakthrough of his humanization and masculinity through the voice that was there all along. Thus, as readers we are able to decide if Jefferson died a man or not.

My goal with this paper is to bring attention to the importance of the nine-page diary that Gaines felt important enough to be its own chapter and its importance in bringing the novel together. While encountering this stream of consciousness, Gaines really wanted to bring the reader on a new journey and he was truly able to achieve that. Gaines gave a voice to the voiceless when no one else saw that voice worthy. Gaines who found Faulkner a literary role model found ways to mirror his work through many of his novels and *A Lesson Before Dying* was no different. Gaines took Faulkner's use of the stream of consciousness and made it the foundation for the flow of the diary. There are many similarities between Gaines and Faulkner like presenting different points of view but not immediately addressing who is speaking. The switch of narrators was more like Faulkner versus following the rules of the traditional 19th century novel like other authors.

The purpose of this paper not only is to bring light to the importance of the diary but get involved in a conversation and really understand why Gaines made it such a focal point. Unlike other critics I really wanted to understand the what was going on within Jefferson's mind and look deep into his entries. Being able to dissect his entries really allowed me to understand his different levels of thought along with the topics and people

he found important in his life. Addressing the significance of the diary is one thing but being able to understand each entry on a personal level helped me understand Jefferson and view his journey to manhood.

The diary challenges the reader to really try and comprehend all that was in Jefferson's mind via a new narrative and a different dialect of the English language. The diary played a pivotal role in Jefferson's growth and without it his manhood would have never been regained. Throughout my reading and analysis of the diary, I am able to understand Jefferson and as the reader make the ultimate decision regarding his manhood.

Set in the 1940s, *A Lesson Before Dying* followed the struggles of the African American community in rural Louisiana. Introduced almost immediately was Jefferson, a twenty-one-year-old black man who found himself getting sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit. Jefferson, following the direction of two men Brother and Bear to a convenience store that ultimately ended in a robbery gone wrong and everyone dead but Jefferson. Even though he was completely innocent Jefferson had to deal with the actions of others and was forced to suffer the consequences due to their poor choices. Jefferson did not have a big family and was really only connected to his godmother, Miss Emma who took the role of a parental figure in his life. Miss Emma bore witness to her godson being sentenced to death but also to being dehumanized in front of an entire courtroom without the opportunity to defend himself. She thus made it her mission to make sure that if her godson was set to die he would approach his death like the man she knew he was not the vile creature the courtroom said he was. Miss Emma confided very closely to Tante Lou another character that Gaines placed in the novel to assist in the driving force

towards Jefferson achieving his manhood. Besides Jefferson, another character that gained a lot of attention throughout the novel was Grant, Tante Lou's nephew. Grant, a man who had left the bayou to pursue higher education but found himself back living a life that was not worthy in his eyes. Each of these individuals played key roles in the final seven months of Jefferson's life and his journey in regaining his manhood. The female characters definitely set the stage for wanting to see change within Jefferson that not even he was capable of understanding or wanting at first. Gaines really made it a point that each character no matter how big or small had some sort of role in Jefferson's life. This definitely shed light on the family approach and the idea that they were truly a close-knit community.

Grant became an important character because he was forced by Miss Emma and Tante Lou to become the person that focused on convincing Jefferson he was worth more than what the courtroom said he was. Even though Grant was a teacher he found no use in teaching Jefferson about life and finding one's self worth. At times, Grant's personal issues and struggles took center stage but it was ultimately Jefferson's story that was worth reading about. Grant struggled to connect to anyone but through his constant jail visits a bond had begun to form with Jefferson that made their connection seem authentic. For so long there was a focus on Grant teaching Jefferson about manhood; but reading the diary, I believe that it was Jefferson that taught the world a lesson.

The novel was centered around Grant's view of the entire situation and it was definitely a negative outlook for the majority of the novel. Many people had to force Grant to find a purpose in his journey with Jefferson because he struggled to see a person behind the death sentence. Many times, I tried to figure out why Grant had such a

presence in the novel but I think Gaines wanted someone that seemed relatable in the sense of questioning the process or struggling to understanding the purpose. By bringing in the diary, Gaines allowed the reader to step back and realize that just because someone is in an unfortunate position like jail does not mean that they or their voice are not of value. Grant did teach us a lesson that giving up would have been the easy way out but sticking to something no matter how unrealistic it may seem brings positive results. By reading the diary, Jefferson has shown the reader that a voice is still an important voice no matter how the voice is heard.

The narrative of the novel changes from a very formal, thought out and often one sided third person point of view to a very raw, emotional, and informal first personal narrative when the diary was introduced. Gaines provided Grant the opportunity to be the voice of the novel along with giving that platform to Jefferson in chapter twenty-nine. The diary thus became a stream of consciousness that was desperately needed to change the direction of the novel and grab the reader's attention. At this point in the novel everything was moving so rapidly and the reader was turning each page waiting for the death of Jefferson to arrive. By inserting the diary so late in the novel, but not at the complete end, Gaines allowed the reader to slow down and really take a moment to understand Jefferson, his life, and his time in jail. Up until the introduction of the diary interactions with Jefferson had been short and had not allowed the reader to connect with him on a personal level. In many ways, the novel can be viewed as Grant's own diary because most of it was through his personal account, minus a few scenes. By breaking away from Grant's voice we were able to understand Jefferson on a personal and emotional level. Not only we were able to have a one on one experience with Jefferson

but we were also able to separate ourselves from the negative voice of Grant. The flow of the novel prior to the diary was formal and traditional narrative form that the diary arriving as its own chapter was an unexpected surprise. I believe that Gaines did that to really personalize the novel and still have unique elements for a traditional setting.

The diary not only presented a change in the narrative but also in the language that was used to really grab the attention of the reader. The dialect that Jefferson wrote in, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) allows the reader to slow their pace and really analyze word for word what Jefferson was trying to say. AAVE incorporates a lot of phonetic spelling so it showed how well Jefferson's listening skills were and really proved that he was more than just a hog going through the motions of life. Incorporating this dialect really humanized Jefferson and made his words seem much sincerer. There was a lack of punctuation and sentence structure but not once did it take away from the words that Jefferson presented. Outside of the diary it was easier to be critical of the structure and grammatical flow but the moment the diary was introduced none of those things mattered. If the diary had been translated from AAVE, I believe that the authenticity of Jefferson's words would have been lost and the reader would not have been able to have a deep connection with him. Not only would the authenticity be lost but the reader would also have given complete trust to whoever was recapping or translating the diary to provide a thorough and legitimate recap of what was said. Assuming had the diary not been presented and Grant was the one giving the details of the diary it would have made it hard to fully believe what he was saying due to his somewhat negative and reluctant nature. Allowing the reader to read the diary in AAVE allowed Jefferson to prove that one does not need a formal education to put forth well thought out words and

vocalize their feelings and thoughts. Those nine-pages were Jefferson's only opportunity to speak against the picture that the white community had painted of him. The diary was the platform where he could not only challenge the negative views towards him but the black community as well and really prove that they were not as different as the world made them out to be. There were absolutely no expectations set forth with the diary and Jefferson was given full freedom with his pencil to write what he felt was important to write. Without the formal structure, the reader really saw the stream of consciousness and his varying topics of conversation that really made the diary more personable.

There are many moments in the novel that I believe created the foundation for Jefferson to find the strength to write about his life in the diary yet two stood out to me the most. The first being the beginning scene in the court room, the place where Jefferson's fate was decided based on a crime he did not commit. Jefferson, an innocent young black man, had to sit through and listen to his own white attorney call him, "a thing, a fool, a boy, and a hog," all while stripping him of his manhood and dehumanizing him in front of a full courtroom. His attorney wasted no time in trying to convince the jury that a boy like him would not be capable of carrying out such actions that he was accused of. Yet, the delivery from the attorney was far from endearing, "Do you see a man sitting here?... Do you see a modicum of intelligence? ... No, gentlemen, this skull here holds no plans" (Gaines 7). His attorney wanted to truly bring him down so that the jury could find sympathy for his actions and he still did not stop there. Jefferson's attorney described him as what he was only worth doing, "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" (Gaines 8). He wanted to make it a point to the jury that

Jefferson was no more than a farm hand who did not have enough thought and brain power to pull together a crime of that magnitude. The attorney pointed out Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother and wanted the jury to think about who they would be hurting if they decided to sentence this young man to death. Using the coldest of statements his attorney turned to the jury and made it very obvious where everyone stood towards Jefferson, "we may see him as not much but he's her reason for existence," even his own attorney couldn't place value on his life. Jefferson was left defeated and worthless and was ready to just live his life counting down the minutes to his death. Growing up, his life was not easy and he struggled with finding a place within society other than being a working man. Jefferson often recalled being a young boy and working in the fields and there really weren't any other memories that he looked back on. Even in the diary, he really did not have much of a childhood to look back on and the only things present were his memories of working. So, when someone can verbally confirm that he is nothing it really put his life into perspective and made it harder for him to believe that he was more than what people made him out to be. Even though he struggled to separate himself from the vile things he was called and ultimately battled those names until the day he died; I believed that they helped fuel his strength to regain his manhood.

Another moment that stood out to me was a conversation between Jefferson and Grant that addressed heroism and the myth that lingered among them and I believed helped incite courage within Jefferson. Grant described the qualities of a hero as someone who "does something for other people... different from other men... about other men," the things he acknowledged he was not but all things he believed Jefferson could be (Gaines 191). Grant was very honest and straightforward with addressing how the world

viewed black men and thus introduced Jefferson to the myth. Grant wanted Jefferson to have a clear as day understanding of what he was talking about, “A myth is an old lie that people live in. White people believe that they’re better than anyone else on earth--- and that’s a myth” (192). He didn’t stop there he also went on to make it applicable to their lives, “The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth” (192). Grant knew and recognized all the odds against black men in the society they lived in but he saw the potential for change within Jefferson, “I want you to chip away at the myth by standing” (192). This was a lot for Jefferson to comprehend and at this moment his emotions began to show and he cried because he knew what the world saw of him and what he was capable of changing. Challenging the myth was not an easy task for anyone but Grant brought it up because he knew that Jefferson had a voice that was worth listening to. Grant knew that if Jefferson found the voice inside himself he would be an example to the many people affected by the myth. Whether it was for Jefferson personally, his godmother, or even the children of the quarter Grant knew Jefferson could be their symbol of change and voice of reason. The myth was going to remain a battle until someone started to stand up against the white community and challenge their unjust beliefs. Whether it was via Jefferson or someone else, the myth needed to be addressed and challenged. Just because Jefferson was sitting in a jail cell did not mean that his voice had no value and Grant made sure to remind him of that. I truly believe that the myth ignited courage within Jefferson that allowed him to vocalize his journey and then was able to see the diary as a tool to regain his identity. The myth always existed but Grant placed it front and center, “Grant challenges Jefferson to defy this myth, to show white

people who perceive him as inferior, as being subhuman, as being a “hog” that he in fact is a human being” (Piacentino 2). Grant believed that by confronting the myth it would “help Jefferson regain his self-esteem and develop his personality,” something that desperately needed to happen (Crisu 167). I believe that Jefferson became emotional because his thoughts about being a lesser human had been confirmed but there was hope for change. Not only was this a moment of clarity for Jefferson, but also for Grant because he was able to view Jefferson was a man with potential of great change. The people who enforced the myth could not stand being viewed as equal with others and wanted to be able to be seen as better than the black members of the community.

Jefferson obviously did not attack the diary head on and still struggled formulating his ideas but I truly believe that the myth and his sentencing lingered in the back of his head while he was writing. Along with the life that he lived these two moments helped uncover the voice that he had been hiding all along.

CHAPTER 2

THE DIARY

Being able to write for his own personal good, was intimidating for Jefferson because this was the first time in his life that he was given the opportunity to express himself in a way that would be understood by himself or by others. Grant advised Jefferson to write something, anything down but he struggled to think of what he wanted to put in the diary. Growing up, Jefferson was never given the opportunity by his nanan because she would, “get other chiren to rite her leter an read her leter for her not me so i cant think of too much to say but maybe next time” (Gaines 226). Not only was he not given the opportunity by his nanan but he could not recall anyone wanting his words on paper. The diary was a new experience for Jefferson and I can only imagine the emotions that he was feeling to finally know that he could document his thoughts. Given his circumstances it would have been easy to assume that he would not entertain the idea of a diary but he was so willing to give it a chance. The circumstances as to why the diary was present weren't ideal but the bright side of the entire situation was that Jefferson had the opportunity to utilize his voice. Mary Ellen Doyle says that crisis is Jefferson's only way to achieve manhood thus without crisis the diary would have never existed. His death being his personal crisis gave him the opportunity to really portray the true Jefferson. The idea that his thoughts mattered had him in disbelief because he did not feel valued growing up. Up until the introduction of the diary, it was evident that Jefferson had given up and was just going through the motions of life; but the final sentence of his first entry said otherwise. After he acknowledged that this was something he was not used to doing he was still hopeful that he would think of something to say, “but maybe next time,”

which showed that he was not going to give up on the diary. The simple statement of optimism showed the growth that Jefferson had gained because had the diary been given at the beginning of his jail sentence it might not have been used. Recalling the interaction, when Grant gave Jefferson the diary, I did not feel confident that Jefferson would actually write in it. What the diary provided the reader was more than what I could have ever imagined. Leading up to the end of the novel, Gaines had allowed a picture of silence on Jefferson's end to be painted and the diary was a nice surprise to combat that. Prior to writing the novel, Gaines knew that he wanted the voice to play a big part of the journey, "After I had gone so far into the novel and Jefferson still refused to communicate with anyone, I knew I had to find some way to make him talk" (Gaines 776). By allowing Jefferson to have the diary it granted him the freedom to document moments of his life and his journey in jail that held great significance. Gaines couldn't allow an entire novel to be written without Jefferson being heard so it was important to add in his personal narrative.

There was no set format or structure that Jefferson stuck to while writing in the diary and that is the beauty of the authentic voice he was providing. After acknowledging this new found experience he immediately jumped into describing the meal that he ate prior to revisiting the diary. The basic meal of "rice an beans an...a cup of milk," the simple luxury of a meal was worth him noting in the diary (Gaines 226). Throughout the diary, we encountered many different things that seemed worthy of writing about, yet the occasional lighthearted entries definitely help humanize Jefferson and his innocence. What he had endured was more than most people would in their lifetimes but when he strayed away from the negative and shed light on the positive experiences of jail it

reminded the reader of the way that he saw the world. Given Jefferson's circumstances he was still able to look at things like meals and found ways to still appreciate the wholesome things of life.

Even though Grant was the one who brought Jefferson the diary, he did not dictate or outline what Jefferson needed to say on paper. Grant's goal was just to make sure that Jefferson was making use of the opportunity to put on paper whatever he was feeling or thinking. Only reading $\frac{3}{4}$ of the first page, Grant got a small insight into the thoughts that were lingering on Jefferson's mind. He acknowledged the fears that Jefferson had about what awaited him but also the many worn areas of the paper from over erasing. It is easy to question why the eraser marks were there and what Jefferson was trying to remove from his writing. Whether he did not like what he wrote or maybe the words did not make sense, the reader would never know what took place on the paper prior to his eraser marks. Jefferson did not mention the erasing so that's where Gaines allows the reader to question what was taken away from the diary. With the mention of the eraser marks in the beginning, I associate them with Jefferson trying to find rhythm and purpose within his writing. This entire experience was new for him and in his life writing had been associated with being in the classroom not something done as a personal activity. Gaines did not give any more insight on the technicalities of the diary, so the presence of other eraser marks would go unknown. Thinking about why Jefferson struggled to view the diary as a positive task could have been him not being able to separate Grant from the title of teacher. Having mentioned that the only time he had the opportunity to provide writing samples was in the classroom he might have been worried that he was going to get graded for his skills or lack thereof. When writing was only

associated with a classroom for so long I can only imagine the struggle it was to separate the two. This is proof of one of the many open-ended scenarios that Gaines presented the reader with and it is up to us to figure out or come to a conclusion as to why certain things are the way they are.

Prior to the diary, Jefferson was built up as an emotionless character and someone who gave up their life the moment the verdict was delivered. Up until chapter twenty-nine, we got to witness the emotions of Grant, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and many others but Jefferson was still vaguely understood. As the reader, we interacted with Jefferson's emotions through the experiences with others in the novel. Grant was the most negative and doubtful character we encountered whereas the female characters wore their emotions on their sleeves and had no problem speaking up against or challenging Grant. Without the female characters, there would have been no journey because they were the ultimate driving force in wanting Jefferson to die like a man not a hog. In many ways, it was easy to see all of these characters within Jefferson throughout his life. It was very easy to make assumptions that he had no feelings towards knowing he was going to die or what he was experiencing. In some ways, it was easy to make the assumption that he had given up and was just living each day waiting to die. For much of the novel, Jefferson was being talked to or not giving confident responses I was not expecting much to change in the diary.

In the chapters leading up to the diary, Jefferson's attitude started to change and he became more receptive to the actions and words of others, specifically those of Grant. Yet, we were still lacking a breakthrough of his character and were only able to understand him through the eyes of others interacting with him. Gaines put a lot of

responsibility on the reader because we really got to create Jefferson's character up until the diary. Through short moments, some better than others, we were able to create the character that we thought Jefferson truly was. My idea of who Jefferson was prior to the diary changed completely after getting the opportunity to connect with him on a personal level. Without the diary, I would have focused more on Grant's transformation versus Jefferson's.

The emotions that were displayed in the diary ranged from fear, sadness, and even sometimes happiness and those emotions really helped Jefferson get his story across to the reader. At first, he didn't know what he felt was appropriate to write but he quickly jumped over that hurdle and addressed the fear that he had towards his death. Knowing when he was going to die was one thing but knowing exactly how and when his life would come to an end was an entirely different level of fear. The fear of what awaited him kept Jefferson awake at night and something like sleep that was supposed to relax him brought him pain and anxiety. Dreaming is usually associated with a positive time when one's mind can wander but for Jefferson it meant something else, "i kept dremin it and i dont want dreem it cause im just walking to somewher but i dont know wher its at an fore i get to the door i wake up" (Gaines 227). Each time he dreamt he began living the nightmare that was creeping closer to the chair that sat behind that door. While awake, it was easier to place attention on other things and allow the thoughts of the electric chair to not take precedence; yet the moment his eyes closed it was a different story.

The diary addressed many different areas of Jefferson's life so it was fitting that he brought up the topic of religion. Throughout the novel, he was not outwardly religious

and really never vocalized his connection with God. His relationship with religion was more of a connection wanted by those around him and one he struggled to understand. Miss Emma and Reverend Ambrose wanted to make sure that he was leaving earth in God's good graces so that he would have a place in heaven. Before the diary it was evident that he struggled with connecting to the idea of religion and it definitely became forced upon him. Even though the religious journey was important, Gaines did not make it a focal point but instead his journey to manhood took the lead. Leading up to the diary, Jefferson just listened and never really questioned God or religion's place in his life because that's not what good young men do. Questioning God or the formalities of religion can come off as disrespectful so Jefferson chose to remain silent. Yet, the diary provided him the opportunity to bring up the issues that he had with his faith or lack thereof. Early on he wrote about Miss Emma and Reverend Ambrose visiting him and the topic of why the Lord died came up and it definitely made him uncomfortable. He knew the answers they were looking for but could not bring himself to give them that satisfaction, "all he want me to do is say i want be up ther wit him an the angels an say if i mean it wil all my heart an sol ill go to heven" (Gaines 227). He had his doubts and did not want to agree to something that he had reservations about and that showed a lot of maturity. He could have so easily given them the responses they were longing for but that idea never crossed his mind or even if it did he did not write about it. At this point in time, he must have realized that leaving a life of truths and doubts was worth more than leaving a life filled with lies. It was interesting that he noted that he was glad when Paul came to pick him up from that meeting because the topic of the afterlife was becoming overwhelming for him. This small piece of information showed how comfortable the

diary had him with speaking up about things that made him feel certain ways. Later on, Jefferson revisited the topic of religion in the diary but on his own terms.

Religion definitely became a topic that Jefferson was vocal about because prior to this opinion was never really regarded or wanted. With religion, someone always knew more and it was just best to accept it and move on. As his death became closer it was normal for him to begin to question and think about the afterlife that awaited him. His issues with religion were racially based because he felt that as a black man he was not viewed as an equal in the Lord's eyes. He began to reflect on his childhood and how it impacted his view of the Lord, "it look like the lord just work for wite folks," and went into a very detailed account about his job hauling water for the workers (Gaines 227). He did not stray away from questioning the Lord's kindness or willingness to bless others, "how com he don't giv a man a little breeze if he so merciful" (228). Jefferson made very valid points and he was not afraid to question the Lord's presence in his life. By revisiting an experience from his childhood, it showed how deeply rooted his issues with religion were because he had been holding it in for so long.

In the chapter prior to the diary he mentioned not having his parents in his life, "Who ever car'd my cross, Mr. Wiggins? My mama? My daddy? They dropped me when I wasn't nothing. Still don't know where I am this minute" (Gaines 224). For someone who had issues with religion he subtly inserted the idea of carrying his own cross showed that he did acknowledge religion in some form. The cross symbolized everything that represented him and he would be separated from his cross the moment his life ended. It can be viewed that the diary was his cross and it would stay beyond his death and be the representation of the man he truly was. Jefferson was definitely more observant of

religion than he seemed and references to religion definitely showed that. When he was given the platform to address religion on his own terms he did it eloquently.

His comfort level with expressing himself became greater and greater and the real Jefferson was beginning to break through his tough exterior. Throughout the diary, it became evident that he began to acknowledge his emotions through the affection and attention he was getting from different visitors. People were going out of their way to interact with him and it was not a normal thing in his eyes, “As an outcast, Jefferson’s subjectivity is marked by his longing for and appreciation of human contact” (Stupp 50). For many people, daily human interaction was a given but for Jefferson it was something worth noting in the diary. Jefferson wanted to be seen as more than a black man just getting through the daily moments of life but to be seen as a living breathing human worth something. Grant showed Jefferson that people cared and thought of him even though he was locked up behind bars. I also think it was important that Jefferson interacted with the children because it was a reminder that he could have been a role model for any of those children. His journey was not one to view as shame but to show how to have strength when the whole world was against him. Just because he was legally separated from the world did not mean that Jefferson became an afterthought to all those outside of the jail.

The interaction with his cousin, a student of Grants really affected him, “my little cosin estel com up an kiss me on the jaw an I coudn hol it back no mo” (Gaines 230). These visitors were bringing out emotions that he had tucked away because they were not needed or wanted throughout his life. A simple kiss, broke him because it was showing the kindness and thoughtfulness of his young relative. He did not reference his childhood

often but with the way he reacted to affection, it was easy to assume that these were all things he lacked in his life.

He also wrote about a breakthrough moment with his godmother and the interaction that he would hold very close to his heart. He was very descriptive in his writing and made sure to capture all the details of his final moments with his godmother, “i tol her i love her an i tol her i was strong an she just took ole and tied an pull me to her and kiss me an it was the firs time she never done that and it felt good” (Gaines 231). As the reader, we did not get a detailed description of their relationship prior to Jefferson’s sentencing but this showed that might have been rocky and tough for the both of them. She took the role as a parental figure in his life and that is a major role for someone to have in anyone’s life. Yet no matter the type of relationship they shared it showed that they did have respect for one another and their goodbye seemed truly genuine and full of love. She truly loved Jefferson and her fighting for him to realize how strong he truly was; was her way of showing how much she believed in him. This entry shed light on things that Jefferson lacked from his life and how impactful small gestures of affection were to him. He wanted to make sure that his godmother left knowing that she was leaving the Jefferson she knew and loved and it was very mature and brave of him to reassure her, “i tol her i was strong an she didn need to come back no mo” (231). In the many visits, she had at the jail, Jefferson was not very responsive and often standoffish but his godmother did not give up on him. The way he acted could have driven everyone away but they chose to stay by his side until the end. That was her way of showing her love for him and the diary was his response to accepting and acknowledging that love. Prior to one of his final visits with his godmothers he wrote hoping he would see her one

last time asking Grant if that was love? Questions like that really put into perspective that many feelings and emotions that Jefferson had no sense of. Love is something that many people can reflect on experiencing in many different ways from adolescence through childhood. Yet, with Jefferson having to confirm his feelings could have been considered love showed how he lacked major things in his life. Reading the diary, there were many times where it became easy to see the growth and change that took place within Jefferson but it was moments such as these that showed he still did not understand basic qualities of life.

Towards the end of the diary, Jefferson apologized to Grant for how he behaved when Vivian came to visit him at the jail. Grant did not ask Jefferson to apologize or even brought up this visit but it was important to Jefferson that he address it and apologize. His interaction with Vivian really left a lasting impression with him because of the way he talked about it, it seemed that he never received attention from a female in that way. The interaction with Vivian really impacted him because he used the word pretty a total of eight times in that journal entry. Throughout the novel and the diary there was no mention of a significant other in Jefferson's life so these types of emotions were new to him. This entry really brought attention to how young he was and the many life experiences that he would never get to enjoy or live through. Being one of the lengthier entries, it was written with a lot of details and he talked about his senses and really took the time to explain his feelings. In no way, was he confessing his love for Vivian but at that moment I believe he realized that the affection from a woman was something that he truly longed for. As the reader, I began to become more sympathetic with Jefferson because it was starting to sink in that he was dying wanting so much more out of life.

Throughout the diary he mentioned connections with several different people but his relationship with Grant really took most of his attention. From the beginning of the diary, he spoke to Grant even though he was not told to address the diary specifically to him. Every person in Jefferson's life made an impact in some shape or form but his relationship with Grant was very important and unique. Grant became the liaison between the "outside" world and Jefferson so their bond was different than those who paid him visits. A lot of pressure was put on Grant to instill change and self-realization within Jefferson. They grew together as individuals and by providing the diary Grant allowed Jefferson to discover a side of himself that was not previously available. Providing the diary was also a time of growth for Grant because he had been so apprehensive about putting so much time and effort towards Jefferson's manhood. Grant really did not stop until he found a way to make Jefferson comfortable with his own voice. Jefferson was always so respectful and addressed Grant as Mr. Wigan which showed that he really was taking this diary seriously. He wrote the diary with the hopeful intentions that Grant would revisit it after he passed and really understand how much he meant to Jefferson. He mentioned several people within the diary but he went back several times and specifically spoke directly to Grant. Those entries really shed light on the impact that Grant had in Jefferson's life and had helped him acknowledge that there were good people in the world. In the small snippets of life, Jefferson never talked about having a male figure present to guide him or just to have as a role model in his life. For once, Grant became that person that someone needed and Jefferson found comfort in having that relationship with him. Jefferson wrote about how he struggled finding the verbal words to explain what he felt but that did not stop him from writing them down. It spoke

volumes of the relationship that they had begun to build with one another, “i just feel like tellin you i like you but i dont kno how to say this cause i aint never say it to nobody before an nobody aint never say it to me” (Gaines 228). Jefferson got very emotional and wrote about his sadness when finding out that Grant would not present at his death. No one should have to apologize for feeling sadness or fear but Jefferson mentioned that he was sorry for crying not once but twice. Jefferson had become very open with his feelings towards Grant. The reasoning behind his emotions towards Grant not being present at his death were because of a connection that he only had with him, “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 somebody” (Gaines 232). Grant was able to see past the labels and the tough exterior and see Jefferson for who he truly was.

Not only did Jefferson focus on visits from family and friends he also spoke about the employees of the jail and the times that they went to visit him. These entries were interesting because he was very refined and mature in the ways that he talked about those people and that says a lot about the man that he had become. As the reader, it would be easy to assume that he would have a lot of anger towards the officers and the jail system and vocalize those issues but he did not. Even in the confines of a private diary he remained respectful and it is interesting to think if he did so because of the possibility of them reading it and take the diary away or if he was just not angry enough at them. After reading the diary and seeing how raw and open he was, I think he chose to not speak ill of the officers because of fear but because there was no valid point in being so angry so close to death. His words alone spoke about their character and thus placed the responsibility on the reader of deciding how they were perceived. Paul, the white deputy,

was the kindest officer in the jail and even though the verbal interactions were short he did not treat Jefferson like a second-class citizen. As his death approached, he noticed that Paul had become different, “paul trying to be hod when he aint like he does want get too close to me no mo,” Jefferson’s thought process was very observant and mature (Gaines 230). He knew that Paul did not want to get close to him because of their relationship would soon come to an end. He had picked up on the behaviors of others and really tried to understand and justify them. His connection with Paul was unique because it was more man to man versus officer and inmate, “he is the only one rond yer kno how to talk like a youman to people” (230). This comment about being treated like a “youman” revisited the opening court scene where he was dehumanized in front of everyone in attendance at the trial. Even though much time had already passed and many people had shown him that he was of value in their lives that moment of being called everything but a human really had lasting effects. This diary provided a lot of progress in his life but he was still dealing with issues of being stripped of his humanity and manhood.

His last full paragraph in the diary recounted his conversation with Chief Gury regarding his treatment of Jefferson while in the jail. Gury wanted to make sure that nothing bad was written about him and asked Jefferson if his treatment was okay. Jefferson noted that Gury asked him to make sure he wrote down on his tablet that he was treat well which is the only time in the diary where someone is requesting what should be written. I don’t know if it was on purpose or not to write down the conversation versus just saying he was treated fairly but I did think it was not as powerful as some of his other entries. The chief did not know who would read the diary once Jefferson passed it on but

I believe he felt it was necessary that he was viewed as being kind and had treated Jefferson fairly. Everyone else had intimate conversations with Jefferson but not one person had made requests to be mentioned in the diary. The chief though made sure to check with Jefferson that he was being written about in a positive manor.

Being in jail had given him a lot of experiences that he really took note of and how little things that are often taken for granted were being taken note of. He wrote a very detailed account of his final meal and it truly showed his innocence but also thankfulness for the simple pleasures of life. Jefferson requested that his godmother cook his final meal and after receiving his last dinner of a pork chop, cornbread, and other delicious foods prepared by her, he noted that it was the best meal she had ever cooked. Jefferson and his godmother had already said their goodbyes so this meal was their last connection before he was executed. Even though no physical words were exchanged between the two, this meal symbolized their goodbyes to each other. He also talked about the final shower and how he was given fresh toiletries which were a luxury he had never gotten. Ironically, some of the best moments of his life were behind bars and the diary provided us with an insight into those moments. In his twenty-one years of life, there were not many experiences that stood worthy to document in his diary but in the seven months or so of being in jail there were many moments that had enough importance to be documented.

As the diary began to near its end, it was extremely obvious how detail oriented Jefferson was. While in jail, each day brought him closer to the end so the sun in his eyes symbolized one less day on earth. Typically, the sun is viewed as a positive, fresh start but Jefferson did not have the luxury of viewing it in that way. Even though the sun did

bring him fear that did not stop him from wanting to watch the sunrise on his final day. He made it a point to talk about the sunrise in the diary, “im gon see one mo sunrise cause i aint gon sleep tonite... im going sleep a long time after tomorrow” he still found a way to enjoy something for the last time (Gaines 233). I viewed this entry in two different ways one being his innocence and the other being his acceptance of his fate. When so little is offered in jail, it became easy to fixate on the little pleasures of life and the enjoyment of a sunrise gave him something to look forward to even in the darkest of times. I also viewed it in a symbolic way that with the last sunrise he was ready to accept the afterlife, accept his fate, and was ready to walk away from his life as strong as he could be.

After his final longer entry, Jefferson began writing in spaced out sentences and as the reader it was only fitting to assume that the end of the diary was near as well as his time on earth. I definitely read those sentences faster because I was anxious to get to the end of what he had to say but also it left me wanting more because I felt like he still had a lot to say. In the last couple of sentences there were really no cohesive thoughts his mind was just all over the place and it was visible in the words he had written. He was so quickly trying to document as much as he could for fear of missing an important detail or thought. Jefferson talked about the moon and the “leves” that he could see but made it a point to mention that he would never get to see them again. He also brought up the afterlife again, “I don’t know if they got a heven... but reven ambrose say they is one for all men,” he still was fearful for the unknown that awaited him (Gaines 233). Even after the countless visits with the reverend regarding his relationship with God, Jefferson still did not feel comfortable with where he stood with religion. I think it was important that

Gaines brought this up as closure so that it was understood that Jefferson did not have hatred toward religion he just had issues and reservations towards it. His underlying issues were that he felt God did not view black people equally and Jefferson did not know if the same heaven that awaited white people was waiting for him. Jefferson also acknowledged his wrong doings that put him into this situation and this was the first time that a sense of blame had come from his mouth. What was unique about that sentence was him mentioning that he would be meeting up with brother and bear soon. That statement made me question Jefferson's state of mind at that point regarding where he thought he was going to end up the moment he died. I want to believe he thought he would be going to heaven but mentioning that he would be meeting up with the two men makes me think that he still had doubts about where his afterlife would be. He never brought up the men that put him in that situation but pointing out that he should have never gone with them makes it known that he acknowledged the position they put him in.

Jefferson put forth a lot of emotions in the diary but one sentence that stood out tremendously was towards the end when he wrote about his fear and how he was shaking. He wanted whoever was reading the diary to know that he was scared, "i been shakin an shakin but im gon stay strong," but he would focus on staying strong (Gaines 233). Him vocalizing his fear definitely humanized him because no matter how strong he seemed he still feared what was to come. A real man acknowledges fear and that is exactly what he did. Jefferson talked about his hand shaking and being able to hear his heart, he really did allow a visual presentation to be painted of himself at that moment. This was a side of Jefferson that the reader didn't get to know prior to this chapter and it really helped connect with him on an emotional level. His character and actions could have been

explained by others but it is not until it came directly from the source that it seemed so powerful. I think Gaines put that sentence in the diary to make the reader acknowledge that you can accept and come to terms with your fate but it is still human nature to be filled with fear.

Jefferson's final statement could have ultimately ended the novel because he confirmed his manhood that had become a source of pain and struggle not only for him but for those in his life. He made sure to tell Grant goodbye and to relay a message to his family and those that worried about him, "tell them im strong tell them im a man," he gave everyone the peace and reassurance that they longed and hoped for. His manhood was the reason for the journey that took place the moment his verdict was rendered and it was up to him to make that final decision whether he would die a man or not. Jefferson could have so easily said he was a man just to avoid confrontation but he did not allow himself to obtain his manhood until he felt it was appropriate. Or Jefferson could have remained stubborn and not have been willing to change his view of himself but Gaines did not allow Jefferson to become the negative character. Anyone, could have viewed Jefferson's growth whether it was Grant, his godmother, or a jail employee and made the conclusion about his manhood but the authenticity would have never been there. Before the end of the diary after the main portions had been written it was extremely obvious that Jefferson had grown into a man and that his journey was one worth reading about. He did not necessarily need to verbally confirm that he had become a man but it was a reassuring touch that he finally saw himself in a new light.

CHAPTER 3

POST DIARY

Within the novel, Jefferson became extremely fixated on the fact that he was called a hog and took that label to heart believing every word of his defense attorney. No matter how many people tried to convince him otherwise the label stuck like glue.

Already viewed as a second-class citizen in the community being compared to an animal was the last thing that he needed to feel less about himself. He struggled with separating himself from being called a hog and at times acted out in ways that he felt were expected from someone being viewed as an animal. From rapid anger to eating food off of the floor he felt it was right to mimic the actions of a hog because that is exactly how he viewed himself. Yet, the moment he decided to pick up the pencil and write words on the page he challenged all beliefs that he was a hog even his own.

Being labeled as a hog was something that truly affected Jefferson but also those around him because they did not view him as an animal and he didn't deserve to be viewed in that way. It is one thing to be called names but to be viewed as an animal really was another level of degradation. Jefferson never revisited the hog conversation in the diary and it was interesting because he did have outburst prior to the diary related to the label. He had become so fixated on being a hog that he did not realize that writing in the diary separated him from being an animal. Animals can be smart and observant of their surroundings but they are not able to pick up a writing instrument and put forth well thought out ideas. The moment he put a pencil to paper was when he shut down all of the people who had called him a hog. It is interesting that Jefferson, Grant, and even Gaines did not address the animal in the room once the diary has arrived. I don't know if it

became assumed that he was able to cut ties with being a hog or if it was something the reader had to decide on. As I read the diary from beginning to end, I was able to read and understand the words of a man not a hog. I truly don't know if Jefferson was ever able to shake that label but what I do know is that he had more faith in himself than he let out to be.

Throughout the novel, our ideas and conclusions of Jefferson were made based on information given from Grant and not necessarily anything that Jefferson had the opportunity to say. Due to Grant's position in the novel, some situations tended to lean on the more negative and pessimistic side; so, without the diary I truly believe that there would have been a lack of sympathy for Jefferson. The diary was important because it allowed the reader to get to know Jefferson in a way that not even Grant had the opportunity to, thus giving the reader an upper hand at connecting with Jefferson. Grant was only able to read a snippet of the diary and even though he was given the diary at the end there was no physical retelling in his narrative. The diary is important because prior to chapter twenty-nine, Grant was in sole control of the narrative that was being told and the reader had to take his voice as the leader. If Gaines had decided against placing the diary in the novel, Grant's voice would have become the main point of focus along with the becoming the most important person to listen to. Not only would Grant's voice have taken precedence but Jefferson's story would have been pushed to the side and not viewed as important. Chapters one through twenty-eight, the reader was making decisions and assumptions about Jefferson via Grant because he was the main character in control. Because of that, Gaines sometimes allowed Grant's personal issues to take priority over the struggles that Jefferson was encountering. Thankfully with the diary

appearing in chapter twenty-nine, Gaines allowed the reader to focus on Jefferson and Jefferson only. As the reader, it was easy to get lost in Grant's struggles and his emotions but the diary made me forget and realize that it was Jefferson I was reading about not Grant. In nine pages, Jefferson accomplished more than what Grant was able to do in an entire novel: connect with the reader on a personal level. From that point of the diary on, Gaines took control from Grant and handed it over to the reader in the form of the diary.

In the novel, there was a great dependence on other people assisting Jefferson achieve his manhood. Whether it was Grant, Miss Emma, Paul, or even the reader it was viewed as a group effort to see the transition from hog, boy, and thing to a full-fledged man. Focusing on Jefferson's manhood, unfortunately at times led to the struggles of other characters taking center stage. As the reader, it was easy to acknowledge the idea that at times Grant became the main focus of the novel and his struggles seemed to be all that mattered. Grant's journey in many ways became relatable and I believe that is why Gaines often shifted to Grant's struggles being a priority. In several ways, we are all Grant often stuck in an unideal situation with no exit in sight but that's not who we should want to be. Even though, sitting in a jail cell should not be a goal, approaching life with an attitude of realistic change is admirable. Everyone will encounter struggles in their lives, some worse than others but how we overcome those struggles is worth thinking about. Jefferson could have so easily turned his back to everyone and lived in silence waiting for his death yet he gave the people who cared for him a chance.

As the reader, I had to remember that without Jefferson, Grant's personal struggles and issues would have never been addressed. The novel along with several articles really placed a lot of focus on Grant and even Paul and thus at times Jefferson

became a secondary character. Throughout Jefferson's time in jail, Paul had become a breath of fresh air and treated Jefferson like a human. Paul went out of his way to make Jefferson's jail time easier and I believe he did that out of the kindness of his heart. Yet, at times I think his role in the novel was viewed as too monumental. The major moment between Paul and Grant took place at the end of the novel when Paul handed off the diary he spoke about what he had witnessed and his thoughts regarding Jefferson, "he was the bravest man in that room today. I'm a witness, Grant Wiggins" (Gaines 256). Gaines made this interaction become the tell all sign of Jefferson leaving the earth as a man and had others deliver the news. This exchange is unique because for the reader, we could have done without it because we were provided the contents of a very raw and intimate diary. Whereas Grant, still had no idea what was written in the diary, was relying on the verbal confirmation from Paul to solidify the state of Jefferson's manhood. Had Grant chosen to be a witness at the death he would not have needed Paul to confirm, deny, or even acknowledge the manhood but he didn't so that was something he had to deal with personally. I do find it rather interesting that Gaines did not take the reader into the details and logistics of Jefferson's death. Up until that point, all of Jefferson's actions had been documented but Gaines never mentioned why he chose to separate the reader from that moment. That is the one moment that neither the reader nor Grant experienced and where all hope and responsibility was placed on Paul to deliver the outcome. Gaines had provided so much detail prior to the death that it could have been quite possible that he wanted the reader to individually address the death on our terms. The answer will remain unknown but maybe for good reason.

Ed Piacentino also talks about Paul and how he was the only one to reject the myth of racism and showed it by embracing the “common humanity that is in us all,” which is a very grand conclusion to make about someone. I do think that Paul’s role in the jail made it easier for Jefferson to connect with people and focus on his journey but I do not believe that Paul was a major factor in Jefferson achieving manhood. In Grant’s experience, Paul played a crucial role by not only delivering the diary along with the verbal confirmation. Whereas the reader, the moment we got to read the diary ahead of Grant, the transformation and achievement of manhood was already witnessed.

The diary provided a lot of answers to Jefferson’s growth and ultimately his feelings towards the many people and experiences present in the last months of his life. I personally would have struggled to have seen a change in him and his character if the diary was not present in the novel. Gaines did the reader a favor by allowing Jefferson to give an uninterrupted narrative of all the things occupying his mind during the final moments of his life. After reading the diary several times, I feel confident enough to say that Gaines could have so easily ended the novel with Jefferson’s final words. There was a lot of ambiguity about whether Grant actually read the diary or what he even did with it so the ending provided a lot of unanswered questions. In some ways, I feel like Gaines still wanted Grant to have the final say within the novel but the diary was what ultimately closed it out. Even though Grant got the last word, I felt that it was the reader’s reaction that became more important versus Grants.

The diary can ultimately be viewed as a way for Jefferson to connect life and death and really place value on all that he experienced in his twenty-one years of life. His life was cut short due to poor decisions and if it weren’t for the stubbornness of those

around him he would have just been another hog on the way to the slaughter house. Yet, because of the attention and persistence from those around him he was able to look at his life in a new light and approach his death as a man. Ernest Gaines does a wonderful job in allowing the reader to get to know Jefferson and the diary became a bridge between a misunderstood man and his self-realization. At nine pages, out of a two hundred and fifty-six-page novel, the diary really brought out a sense of strength that was not visible within Jefferson prior to its introduction. The diary was able to challenge Jefferson to look back at his life and his time in jail and really focus on what was deemed important in his life and he was really able to do that. Most of what he focused on was his life after the verdict was rendered but it helped him address topics and people that he found value in.

Jefferson's manhood became the topic of conversation throughout the novel and was the reasoning behind all of the events that took place. There was no concrete definition of what it meant to be a man and through his voice, Jefferson was able to exemplify qualities of what I believe constitute manhood. Gaines did not provide a checklist or some sort of handbook with guidelines about one's manhood that decision was really left up to the reader and the individual. After reading the diary, several times, to me manhood was the idea that someone could accept their fate no matter what it was but still not have hatred towards the world. Jefferson could have so easily turned his diary into a hate and disappointed filled book but he chose to focus his energy on different things. Grant was able to use the novel as his personal diary but struggled with make it a positive filled space and did not really turn his attitude around until much closer until the end. Whereas Jefferson only had a short time to use his voice so he really chose to use it wisely. Without the diary, *A Lesson Before Dying* would have just documented the

unfortunate life of a young man trying to figure out his place in life through the eyes of others. Gaines certainly gave a voice to the voiceless and it was worth it. Because of the diary, we were able to witness growth, strength, and the achievement of manhood through someone who was doubted by the world.

The entire novel was set around the idea of a lesson and it really became important to take a step back and figure out who the lesson was geared towards. I struggled with wanting to fixate on one character's journey and at times even felt that the reader was the only one to gain a lesson. After looking at the novel again, I realized that the lesson was for Jefferson, Grant, and even the reader. For Jefferson, the lesson was that he was in control of his own manhood and not to allow other's negativity to dictate his self-worth. Even at the lowest point of his life he needed to be strong not only for himself but those around him. The diary thus proved that he learned a lesson that he was more than any negative belief and it was only up to him to decide whether or not he would die as a man. Even though Grant did not have a mega transformation, that was assumed would eventually happen, he did learn a lesson centered around personal growth. He was the character who challenged the entire process surrounding Jefferson and at times he did not believe Jefferson would change. I believe the novel ended with Grant never reaching a total maturity change because I felt that there was not a lot of clarity regarding his growth. His lesson was centered around the idea that persistence can lead to self-realization in others and it was evident with not giving up with Jefferson. His lesson was not necessarily a deeply personal one but more so in the idea that being selfish can have effects on multiple people. Had he chosen to walk away from helping Jefferson he would have hurt his aunt, Miss Emma, and ultimately Jefferson. Along with them, the

reader definitely was able to view this novel as a personal lesson. The lesson that the reader was able to gain is that it is so easy to fall into the trap of being negative and apprehensive like Grant and often contemplate walking away from opportunities to help others. In the world we live in we should not idolize being like Grant but instead try to live our lives like Jefferson. Jefferson proved that struggles are what make the journey difficult but it is how you approach those struggles that defines one's life.

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