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LANGAGE ET COMMUNICATION



revue électronique

Département des Sciences
du Langage et de la Communication

Université Alassane Ouattara
(Bouaké - Côte d'Ivoire)

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LIGNE EDITORIALE

Au creuset des Sciences du Langage, de l'Information et de la Communication, la Revue Electronique du Département des Sciences du Langage et de la Communication **REL@COM** s'inscrit dans la compréhension des champs du possible et de l'impossible dans les recherches en SIC. Elle s'ouvre à une interdisciplinarité factuelle et actuelle, en engageant des recherches pour comprendre et cerner les dynamiques évolutives des Sciences du Langage et de la Communication ainsi que des Sciences Humaines et Sociales en Côte d'Ivoire, en Afrique, et dans le monde.

Elle entend ainsi, au-delà des barrières physiques, des frontières instrumentales, hâtivement et activement contribuer à la fertilité scientifique observée dans les recherches au sein de l'Université Alassane Ouattara.

La qualité et le large panel des intervenants du Comité Scientifique (Professeurs internationaux et nationaux) démontrent le positionnement hors champ de la **REL@COM**.

Comme le suggère son logo, la **REL@COM** met en relief le géant baobab des savanes d'Afrique, situation géographique de son université d'attache, comme pour symboliser l'arbre à palabre avec ses branches représentant les divers domaines dans leurs pluralités et ses racines puisant la serve nourricière dans le livre ouvert, symbole du savoir. En prime, nous avons le soleil levant pour traduire l'espoir et l'illumination que les sciences peuvent apporter à l'univers de la cité représenté par le cercle.

La Revue Electronique du DSLC vise plusieurs objectifs :

- Offrir une nouvelle plateforme d'exposition des recherches théoriques, épistémologiques et/ou empiriques, en sciences du langage et de la communication,
- Promouvoir les résultats des recherches dans son champ d'activité,
- Encourager la posture interdisciplinaire dans les recherches en Sciences du Langage et de la Communication,
- Inciter les jeunes chercheurs à la production scientifiques.

Chaque numéro est la résultante d'une sélection exclusive d'articles issus d'auteurs ayant rigoureusement et selon les normes du CAMES répondu à un appel thématique ou libre.

Elle offre donc la possibilité d'une cohabitation singulière entre des chercheurs chevronnés et des jeunes chercheurs, afin de célébrer la bilatéralité et l'universalité du partage de la connaissance autour d'objets auxquels l'humanité n'est aucunement étrangère.

Le Comité de Rédaction

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La Revue Langage et Communication est une revue semestrielle. Elle publie des articles originaux en Sciences du Langage, Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication, Langue, Littérature et Sciences Sociales.

I. RECOMMANDATIONS AUX AUTEURS

Les articles sont recevables en langue française, anglaise, espagnole ou allemande. Nombre de page : minimum 08 pages, maximum 15 pages en interlignes simples. Marges : Haut 3 cm ; Bas 3 cm ; Gauche 3.5 cm ; Droite 3.5 cm ; Réliure 0.5 cm. Numérotation numérique en chiffres arabes, en haut et à droite de la page concernée. Police : Times New Roman. Taille : 11. Orientation : Portrait, recto.

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Pour répondre aux Normes CAMES, la structure des articles doit se présenter comme suit :

- ✚ Pour un article qui est une contribution théorique et fondamentale : Titre, Prénom et Nom de l'auteur, Institution d'attache, adresse électronique, Résumé en Français, Mots clés, Abstract, Key words, Introduction (justification du thème, problématique, hypothèses/objectifs scientifiques, approche), Développement articulé, Conclusion, Bibliographie.
- ✚ Pour un article qui résulte d'une recherche de terrain : Titre, Prénom et Nom de l'auteur, Institution d'attache, adresse électronique, Résumé en Français, Mots clés, Abstract, Key words, Introduction, Méthodologie, Résultats, Analyse et Discussion, Conclusion, Bibliographie.
- ✚ Les articulations d'un article, à l'exception de l'introduction, de la conclusion, de la bibliographie, doivent être titrées, et numérotées par des chiffres (exemples : 1. ; 1.1. ; 1.2 ; 2. ; 2.2. ; 2.2.1 ; 2.2.2. ; 3. ; etc.).

Les références de citation sont intégrées au texte citant, selon les cas, de la façon suivante : (Initiale (s) du Prénom ou des Prénoms de l'auteur. Nom de l'Auteur, année de publication, pages citées). Les divers éléments d'une référence bibliographique sont présentés comme suit : Nom et Prénom (s) de l'auteur, Année de publication, Zone titre, Lieu de publication, Zone Editeur, pages (p.) occupées par l'article dans la revue ou l'ouvrage collectif. Dans la zone titre, le titre d'un article est présenté en romain et entre guillemets, celui d'un ouvrage, d'un mémoire ou d'une thèse, d'un rapport, d'une revue ou d'un journal est présenté en italique. Dans la zone Editeur, on indique la Maison d'édition (pour un ouvrage), le Nom et le numéro/volume de la revue (pour un article). Au cas où un ouvrage est une traduction et/ou une réédition, il faut préciser après le titre le nom du traducteur et/ou l'édition.

Ne sont présentées dans les références bibliographiques que les références des documents cités. Les références bibliographiques sont présentées par ordre alphabétique des noms d'auteur.

III. RÈGLES D'ÉTHIQUES ET DE DÉONTOLOGIE

Toute soumission d'article sera systématiquement passée au contrôle anti-plagiat et tout contrevenant se verra définitivement exclu par le comité de rédaction de la revue.

NB : Pour les besoins de l'instruction, une contribution financière est demandée.

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MARTYRDOM IN ERNEST GAINES'S *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

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Abstract :

Ernest Gaines's novel *A Lesson Before Dying* satirizes the relationships between Whites and Blacks. As White people refuse the presence of Blacks next to them, they inflict inhuman treatments on the latter who come to be dehumanized. Belittled among the rank of animals, Blacks have no privilege because no legal provisions bound to protect their rights. Refusing to be seen as inferior beings, they go against ideologies and stereotyped images that marginalize them, and reversely they fight to assert their humanity. Their heroism and courage often end in death, but like martyrs, they die with dignity having the conviction that, they too, are human beings.

Keywords: dehumanization, debasement, marginalization, humanity, martyr, dignity

Resumé :

Le roman d'Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*, fait la satire des relations entre Blancs et Noirs. Alors que les Blancs refusent la présence de Noirs à leurs côtés, ils infligent des traitements inhumains à ces derniers, qui finissent par être déshumanisés. Rabaisés au rang d'animaux, les Noirs n'ont aucun privilège car aucune disposition légale ne protège leurs droits. Refusant d'être considérés comme des êtres inférieurs, ils vont à l'encontre des idéologies et des images stéréotypées qui les marginalisent et, inversement, ils se battent pour affirmer leur humanité. Leur héroïsme et leur courage se terminent souvent par la mort, mais comme des martyrs, ils meurent dans la dignité, convaincus qu'ils sont aussi des êtres humains.

Mots-Clés: déshumanisation, avilissement, marginalisation, humanité, martyr, dignité

Introduction

In American literature in general, and in African-American's in particular, writers paint the relations between Whites and Blacks. These relations are very often depicted in terms of conflicts in so far as the former have an absolute domination, while the latter fight to regain their human dignity. It is this situation marked by social clashes that African-American writers like Ernest Gaines point out.

Gaines's novel *A Lesson Before Dying* presents a racist society that dominates and exploits Blacks. In a parallel way, the society recognizes no human values, rights and dignity ascribed to them. They are belittled among the rank of animals, and because of that dehumanization, they rebel against racist practices and opinions to assert their humanity. Their rebellion often leads to death, but before passing away in these conditions, they develop the conviction and belief that Blacks are also human beings and not animals. The characters' quality of martyrdom arouses proportionally to their suffering and subsequent death. Black martyrs become models of fight for pride and dignity that foreshadow a brighter future for their race. The purpose of this paper is to explore the transformation of defeat and death into martyrdom as the novel *A Lesson Before Dying* pictures the black characters.

A Lesson Before Dying dramatizes an instance of binary oppositions in terms of relationships between two races. These relationships are constructed in such a way that the Whites believe that they are superior to the Blacks who, in turn, come to incorporate the idea that they are stupid whereas the Whites are intelligent. However, the main protagonist in the novel deconstructs what can be termed the white metaphysical thought. Although Jefferson is sentenced to death for a crime he has not committed his posture is to reverse the oppositions that ascribe to the black race an unprivileged status. Thus, the analysis of the main protagonist's sense of martyrdom in *A Lesson Before Dying* resorts to the deconstruction theory. In *Force of Law* (1990), J. Derrida concedes that deconstruction often involves the analysis of a certain binary dichotomies or dialectical oppositions (such as mind/body, culture/nature) which inhabit western metaphysical thought. He argues that deconstructive analysis attempts to show that these binary dichotomies or dialectical oppositions implicitly privilege one term over the other and then further shows how that binary dichotomy or dialectical opposition is subverted and overturned by re-privileging the supplementary, unprivileged term over the privileged dominant term. In fact, white people think that they are superior and more intelligent than Blacks, while the latter are regarded as inferior and stupid beings. The current analysis aims at deconstructing that thought in order to restore Blacks' dignity necessary for their humanity.

The study of martyrdom in *A Lesson Before Dying* begins with the process of dehumanization of Blacks by whites. With the rampant racism in the novel and its corollaries of segregation and stereotyped images, Blacks are considered as inferior, not intelligent enough to act consciously. The second phase of the analysis concerns Blacks' reaction against racist opinions. The Black protagonists' heroic actions, their access to education and their understanding of religious teachings as well enable them to restore their dignity as human beings.

1. Blacks' dehumanization

A Lesson Before Dying shows that the phase of Blacks' dehumanization grows in proportion when their good human qualities such as intelligence and independence are taken away from them. Basing their argument on the view that Blacks are unworthy of human qualities, they are debased, mistreated and marginalized. In this process of dehumanizing black people, racism appears as an aspect by which they are deprived of their human rights.

1.1. Racism as a corollary of dehumanization

Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* lays the emphasis on racism around which most of the events in the novel revolve. Racism is the belief that people of some races are superior or inferior to others. The Whites in the novel think that they are superior to Blacks. This belief governs the relations between the two races. The story in the novel mentions how such practices are operated when Jefferson, a young black man is accused of having killed Alcee Grope, a white man. Despite the fact that there was no evidence against Jefferson, he was sentenced to death by electrocution.

But the trial is marked by a double flaw. The first concerns the speed with which the verdict is given. In a fair trial, before bringing a suspect before the courts for a crime he is supposed to have committed, police investigators collect evidence and situate his responsibility. It is at this stage that the suspect can be charged of a crime and the trial can take place. In the case of Jefferson, the jurors did not consider the legality of the situation and gave quickly the verdict: "Jefferson is guilty of robbery and murder in the first degree" (P7).

The second flaw is the composition of the court. During Jefferson's trial, the judge, the lawyers and all members of the jury are Whites. The story shows how justice is grounded on injustice, and how the trial pictures a society dominated by whites. Because

the juridical system is marked by white racism, the law cannot help Jefferson who is a black man. The public defender, Jefferson's attorney supposed to provide evidence of the black suspect's innocence considers him as a dumb animal: "It would be like tying a hog down into that chair and executing him, an animal that didn't know what any of it was all about" (P 23).

Arguing that Jefferson is nothing but a dumb animal, hardly more worthwhile than a hog, and accordingly not able to plan such a scheme, Jefferson's lawyer does not plead to discharge his client. Reversely, he supports and confirms a racist thesis that denies Blacks any rights, because an animal is not supposed to enjoy any. Beyond the case of his client, he takes on the whole black community. For him, Blacks are not so ingenious to plan or do something skillfully and intelligently. His so-called plea is not supportive of Jefferson when he seizes the opportunity to express his contempt and his rejection of the black race. The lawyer's feeling of hatred to Blacks exceeds the American context to stretch to the whole African continent when he says: "A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa, yes, yes that can do, but to plan?" (P6).

He compares the whole African continent to a jungle and the conclusion of his speech for the defense is to assert that African-Americans as well as Africans are not civilized. As such, they are not able to do things and act intelligently. The question mark at the end of the quotation shows his certainty that Blacks are not right-minded people. This is why he gives them no human attributes.

During the shoot-out causing the death of Alcee Grope, two Blacks (Bear and Brother) have been also killed. But contrary to Alcee Grope, no police report mentions their death. The case of Bear and Brother is not in the news because Whites have no consideration for Blacks. This attitude shows that Blacks live in a racist environment that hates them. Their situation has never been a concern for Whites.

When Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother knows that her godson is qualified as a hog and must be electrocuted, she gets so upset that she sends Grant, a high educated black man to tell him that he is not an animal, but a human being. Grant is reluctant to report Miss Emma's request for two reasons: The first reason is that he is totally desperate, to the extent that he sees Jefferson's trial as an elaborate performance with a predetermined conclusion: Jefferson is found guilty and killed. He knows the racist attitudes of the social environment he lives in and he is sure that by no means, Jefferson can escape the capital punishment. For him, Jefferson's situation is a lost cause.

The second reason why Grant is reluctant to transmit Miss Emma's request is his fear to expose himself to the contempt of Whites working at the jail. As a highly educated man, his principal goal is to fight with pride against racism and its institutional system. He is aware that going to the jail to visit Jefferson, he will face racism, since he must have the authorization from the sheriff, Sam Guidry. Grant's bad omen is not far from being a reality. During his frequent visits, he has to spend hours before meeting Henri Pichot, the owner of the plantation where they live and Sam Guidry as well. When they finally come, they do not apologize for being too late. For them, apologizing for being two hours and half late reads as a sign of weakness and even a humiliation before a Black. Their attitude shows that even if Blacks are highly qualified and educated, the latter still remain inferior to Whites. In reply, as Grants wants to avoid the racist system that belittles the Black, he is unwilling to go and visit Jefferson.

Knowing Grant's level of literacy and his intention to improve the living conditions of his people on the plantation, the behavior of Henri Pichot and Sam Guidry aims at having a cooling effect on his zeal and efforts in order to discourage him. For each of his visits, he has to wait in the kitchen. He considers this space and the time spent as a deep humiliation: "the humiliation I had to go through, going into that man's kitchen. The hours I had to wait while they ate and drank before they would see me" (P 62).

Portraying the role of the kitchen as a place of servitude, Gaines's position is similar to L. Hughes's. In L. Hughes's poem entitled "I TOO" (1926), the main character is presented as an inferior servant working for a white family who is frequently sent to the kitchen when his master receives guests. The two authors present the kitchen as a place of social hierarchy, since it is where their respective characters are frequently humiliated by Whites who show them their status as inferior beings.

The fact of ignoring Grant's presence in the kitchen tends to demotivate the Black Civil rights fighter. The sheriff sees his frequent visits to Jefferson as futile and unnecessary, because it changes nothing to Jefferson's condition. From the sheriff's condescending attitude and carelessness, Grant understands the functioning of the racist society he lives in: Whites decide on the destiny of Blacks usually in negative ways. This negation not only makes Blacks lose their dignity, but also destroys their lives. The process of dehumanization of Blacks that has started with racism continues with racial segregation.

1.2. Racial Segregation

Racial segregation is the official practice of keeping people apart, usually people of different sexes, races or religions. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* deals with this theme to provide another example of racial inferiority and dehumanization. The story in the novel takes place in a small town, "Bayonne", precisely on a plantation owned by Henri Pichot, a white master. "Bayonne" embodies the characteristics of the typically racist and segregationist white society. The town is divided into two parts, one part for Whites and the other for Blacks. The black section is far from the white's. The road leading to this section is darker than the main streets built in the white section.

When the novel presents "Bayonne" in this way, it points out the precarious living conditions of Blacks. Their living area looks like a slum that rhymes with insecurity. It is in this section that the shoot-out takes place causing the death of Alcee Grope, for which Jefferson is wrongly accused and sentenced to death. Refusing to live side by side with such embarrassing neighbors, Whites set black quarters far from theirs. This marginalization that Blacks are subject to is another evidence of their dehumanization because they are given no particular attention and importance by Whites.

The situation that Blacks undergo in *A Lesson Before Dying* is similar to what is described in *The Fire Next Time* (1963). In J. Baldwin's novel, oppression is coupled with segregation. Whites and Blacks do not live side by side, since the former live uptown and the latter downtown. Blacks are not allowed to go uptown, for fear of being lynched. Then, they live and grow in slums that rhyme with squalor, insecurity and noise.

African-American writers like Gaines insist on segregation that prevails in their fictional world to depict a system of domination and ill-treatments set up against the Blacks. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the Whites' dominant position is unveiled when the Blacks are trapped in a system that drives them to work for Whites only. White families own plantations and black families work on them. White women bear children and black women care for them. Being at the mercy of the white society, Blacks have no decisions to make, and enjoy no legal provisions to protect their rights. In such a context, their living conditions are not far from that of the livestock; giving raise to their consideration as animals. It is due to this opinion that white people qualify Jefferson as a hog. For them, he must die by electrocution with the conviction that he is an animal.

In "Bayonne", the Blacks' living conditions are at worst. In addition to the division of the town into two opposite zones, with one viable section for Whites and the other precarious and gloomy for Blacks, public buildings like churches, courthouses and schools are also marked by segregation. The most striking fact for black people in "Bayonne", is the segregation at church. For them, all human beings are equal since they are all created by God after His image. Their perception is based on a passage from the Holy Bible which states: " And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our

likeness” (Genesis 1:26). The Church should be grounded on the Scriptures and there should not be any distinction between Blacks and Whites. Nonetheless, this divine principle is not enforced in “Bayonne”, in so far as a clear distinction is noted between Whites and Blacks. Because of segregation that takes place within the church and the oppression that they undergo, Grant, the main character thinks that God is not acting in the favor of Blacks in “Bayonne”. He has even the impression that God Whites worship is different from theirs. He believes that theirs is impotent or nonexistent since he does not grant their wishes by rescuing them from their daily suffering. He shows his discouragement and his loss of faith in God to his aunt saying: “ I told her that I didn’t believe anymore and I didn’t want her to try forcing it on me” (P.75). Grant, the most highly educated black on the plantation has no more faith in God, because he notices that the Christmas program of the black Catholic Church is the same every year. For him, the monotony of the Christmas program is synonymous of the unchanging condition of Blacks. Utterly disappointed, he adds: “There was no one thing that can change my faith” (P.79). Then he wonders whether life will ever change for black people in “Bayonne.” He comes to the conclusion that Blacks in that town have only one fate: the loss of their dignity and humanity at the hands of white people.

Like the church, the school also shows evidence of segregation. In “Bayonne,” the Jim Crow Laws that refer to practices, laws or institutions to separate black people from Whites take place also at school (E. Foner, 2002). There are two elementary catholic schools uptown, one for Whites and the other for Blacks. Grant, the most educated black in the quarter is the one who teaches in the black section. He presents that school as dilapidated premises. His classroom is also the place where worships take place on Sundays. So there is a perpetual commotion after class or worship. The students’ desks are used as the benches upon which people sit during church meeting. The blackboard is set onto the back wall.

The dilapidation of the school does not give good conditions to study. The overuse of the benches and the premises by the students and the Christians causes their deterioration. On top of that, the site of the blackboard does not permit students to follow duly the class, since it is opposed to the teacher’s desk. In that context, students must turn round each time to see the board. In such bad conditions, they seldom understand the lessons. For example, one of them fails to recite his lessons correctly when he is quizzed by the superintendent, Dr. Joseph Morgan during his visit. In addition to the shoddy quality of the school, the books used by Grant’s students are in a poor condition. These books have already been used and damaged by white students.

Grant informs the superintendent about the dilapidation of the school and the bad quality of the books, as he hopes to have an improvement of his working conditions. The superintendent replies to Grant by asking him to send his students to work on fields to earn money. His suggestion does not meet the solution to the problems raised by Grant. Interpreting the poverty of black families as a sign of laziness rather than a consequence of inequality, Dr Joseph Morgan openly shows his racist and segregationist profile. Refusing to accept the idea of the bad state of the school and used textbooks, he emphasizes indignities that Blacks suffer due to segregation.

In terms of learning and teaching conditions, Blacks are disadvantaged. Grant, the school teacher complains about the school program when he says: “ I teach what the white folks around here tell me to teach: reading, writing and ‘rithmetic” (P 10). Grant shows his dissatisfaction with the job because the curriculum he is given is exclusively concentrated on teaching white values to black children. In this context, he cannot avoid the pitfalls of being black and poor despite his high academic level. His own education was based on learning the cultural lexis of white America. He realizes that he is perpetuating this system. This is why, he hates his job because he views the school as a place of discrimination and segregation that purports to reproduce the values designed by the white dominant society. He has passively accepted a job which has nothing to do

with his own vision concerning the improvement of the Blacks' conditions in "Bayonne". He declares his opposition to the school program handed to him when he says: "... nothing about dignity, nothing about identity, nothing about loving and caring" (P.19). This is the reason why the sheriff was reluctant to Grant's frequent visits to Jefferson in jail. For the sheriff, teaching dignity to Blacks is not part of the curriculum given to Grant. That curriculum is intended to teach Blacks' inferiority and to belittle them among the rank of animals, rather than enhancing their image and quality as human beings. Like the other white people, the sheriff produces various stereotypes against the Blacks.

1.3. Stereotyped Images

A Lesson Before Dying highlights stereotyped images that tend to dehumanize Blacks. Stereotyped images are any sets of characteristics that people believe represent a particular type of persons. In the novel, Whites have a fixed general idea or image about Blacks, considering them as persons incapable of thinking like animals. They expect Blacks to behave exactly according to what they are thought to be, that is to say, in savage ways. For instance, the white people view Jefferson as a hog. During Jefferson's trial, his attorney focuses his defense for the speech on the fact that he is too stupid to be worth executing. For him, Jefferson is not intelligent enough to plan meticulously a crime, calling him "a dumb animal" (P23). He ends his plea with the idea that Jefferson can die like a "contented hog" (p23).

The lawyer's words deny him his quality of human being, his will and his spirit. He is seen as a mindless individual. Seemingly, the lawyer's plea should aim at avoiding the capital punishment, but he is in fact dehumanizing Blacks. His reasoning consists in arguing that he is not defending a human being, but an animal. Since animals have no rights and are not endowed with any faculty that can be possibly used to plan any murder, Jefferson is unable to have committed the crime. However, the black suspect considered as an animal deserves no legal protection. It is with the wealth of this belief that the lawyer disregards the legal protection the black man should enjoy. In a parallel way, the white lawyer does not insist on the lack of evidence concerning the murder. Beyond Jefferson's case, it is the whole black community that is regarded as wildlife and must accordingly be destroyed.

That image ascribed to Blacks justifies the frequent violence and injustices perpetrated against them. Whites do not see them as equal beings, but as inferior species. That degrading image attributed to them and particularly to Jefferson inspires his godmother, Miss Emma. The black woman asks Grant to teach him that he is a human being. When Grant attempts to teach him about dignity, Jefferson insists that dignity is for "youman, not for hogs" (p65). He eats and snuffles in imitation of a hog. The narrator describes his behaviors as follows: "He knelt on the floor and put his head inside the bag and starting eating, without using his hands. He even sounded like a hog" (P65).

By refusing to use his intellectual and spiritual capacities, Jefferson becomes the negative archetype of his race. He decides to carry the mantle of inferiority placed on him by Whites, rather than fight to remove it. He willingly embodies all the stereotypes Whites heap on Blacks. Neither does he think or act independently, nor does he fight against his oppressors. Jefferson's reproduction of these stereotypes makes him act like an animal and also destroys his human dimension. Those who are not morally strong to repulse these stereotypes will incorporate them and will have their lives guided by them. Their lives will be influenced by these stereotypes according to their seriousness and their substance. Jefferson behaves exactly according to what white people believe he is. During the first four visits in his cell, he refuses to speak and act like a human being. He even refuses to eat the food he is brought, and he prefers to eat corn that is used to feed hogs.

The black man's attitude shows evidence that he is not only physically imprisoned, but he is also spiritually imprisoned. He expresses his anger not simply because he is sentenced to death, but because he is called a hog. His main concern is not to die as a hog. Like any humans he wishes to die with dignity, which is synonymous of a glorious past and a lifetime full of success. This shows his importance within his community. But when he is described in the course of the trial as an animal, especially on the eve of his death, he feels extremely painful. For Jefferson, that image repeatedly mentioned during the trial that has been attended by many people, blacks as well as whites, erases a whole history and makes the individual feel ashamed. Dying this way is a disgrace for the black man and it does not testify to his greatness within his community. Definitely, Jefferson wants to die as a human being.

The second reason why Jefferson gets angry is related to the sufferings of Blacks in his community. He is aware that his current situation is a typical example of the sufferings encountered by past generations, his ancestors, and the ones future generations will face. He is frustrated to notice that both past and future generations have no means to defend themselves when Whites make their lives a misery. Blacks endlessly undergo injustices with impunity. Their complaints and helplessness have no recourse. Since nobody lends his support to Blacks, Jefferson's anger is in fact his latest rebellion against his oppressors before his death.

Stereotyped images continue at Grant's school which works according to the rules of the white society. During his visit at the school, Dr Morgan Joseph, the superintendent qualifies Grant's students as "physical laborers" and "good crop" (P 46). The "physical laborers," for Dr Morgan, implies that Blacks should be working on white plantations as they did when they were slaves. He views education as a threat to white domination. From his perspective, the more Blacks are educated, the less Whites will have authority on them. That is why, he does not congratulate Grant on the quality of his teaching. Instead, he qualifies his students as "good crop", and considers them as objects, not as human beings. In his mind, black children should grow up and work on white plantations. Dr Morgan still incorporates the view that education is a dangerous device because it will destroy the institution of slavery and contribute to raising African Americans above servile status (J. Fleming, 1976).

Like Jefferson, Grant's students conform to what white people believe they are, that is, being hired for physical labor like chopping and sawing woods. The teacher expresses his pain when he describes his students: "They laughed and kidded each other while they worked" (P 48). Grant certainly dislikes their acting like their parents and grandparents in the past, when the latter picked cotton, gathered potatoes, pulled onions and worked in the garden.

From the description above, it can be inferred that Blacks are so used to stereotyped images that they have come to like them. These images make them more docile than aggressive. These stereotypes are so destructive that Blacks have come to develop the idea that going along with them is easier than fighting them. The children's enjoyment of the physical work is a concrete example that makes docility easier.

Facing the inhuman treatments that strip them of their human attributes, Blacks feel brave enough to go against their dehumanization to assert their humanity with dignity.

2. The value of human dignity

The black community of "Bayonne" in *A Lesson Before Dying* gets organized with a view of getting rid of racist opinions, segregationist practices and stereotyped images that dehumanize them. To this end, with heroism, they fight back the repressive system to show that they are worthy of human dignity.

2.1. Heroism as a Sense of Dignity

Heroism which is a great courage and bravery appears as a major theme in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Several characters embody pride, hope and the future of the whole black community. Wrongfully accused and imprisoned for a murder he has not committed, Jefferson is sentenced to death. Grant is in charge of teaching him that he is a human being and not a hog. As Grant explains to him the meaning and the goal of heroism, he insistently says that being a hero will destroy the myth about the white. Jefferson finally understands the value and the importance of the task he is given by Grant. He is now aware that he has become more than an ordinary man and his death will represent much more than an ordinary death. It will draw a particular attention on the fate that the whole black race undergoes in America.

Jefferson has then the opportunity to stand up for his community. As a martyr, he has become a symbol of his people who understand that the conditions in which he faces death will result in gaining self-confidence and potential. He appears as a standard bearer of his community and he can lead and show them how to defy and overcome the fear of death. It is owing to this belief that they demonstrate their humanity and dignity. Jefferson adds that his sense of humanity rises when he starts writing. Though his handwriting is labored, child-like and ungrammatical, it contains his meditations on human condition. He clearly states the difference between men and hogs when he writes: "If I ain't nothing but a hog, how come they just don't knock me in the head like a hog?..... Man walk on two foots, hogs walk on four hoofs" (P 220).

Through these words, he realizes that he is a man. He becomes aware of his importance to his community when he sends Grant to tell them that he is a man. In other words, he is determined to stay emotionally and mentally strong. He transmits to his people a model of courage and induces them to face the realities of life without recoiling and fearing. Then, before dying, he completes his transformation into a dignified and exemplary human being. Paul Bonin, a young white deputy working at the jail in "Bayonne" reports that Jefferson has become the bravest man in the room the day of his execution. Dying with dignity, he becomes a heroic figure of his people.

Heroic death is also depicted in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. In this novel, Shadrack, one of the black male characters takes part in World War I in France. As he returns, he notices that the situation of the black community in "Medallion" has not changed and has even become worse. To improve the living conditions of his people, he holds a demonstration named The National Suicide Day that takes place each year January 3rd to protest against the white administration of "Medallion." During one of the demonstrations, the newly built tunnel collapses causing the death of Shadrack and several demonstrators.

Like Shadrack's death, Jefferson's execution does not cause despair on their respective communities. On the contrary, it entails hope for a better future. In the case of Shadrack, the collapse of the tunnel requires a rebuilding that generates job opportunities for the black community. As for Jefferson, his death causes the white administration in "Bayonne" to be aware of their atrocities against Blacks and decides to treat them with more consideration.

Facing the white dominant society, Blacks need heroic figures from their communities to defend their interests. Very often, the defense of such interests, rights, and well-being for their people ends up in the supreme sacrifice. Dying amounts to the salvation of their communities. As the bearers of the flaming torch, the heroes show to their brothers the way to fight. Some of them die as a result of their heroism, but they are aware that they should not give up. Freedom and the recognition of their rights as humans are the immediate consequences of their perpetual struggle. Through their courage and dauntlessness the heroes purport to show that Blacks are not as docile and passive as they are thought to be. They want the white people to understand that as human beings, they also deserve respect and consideration since they have equal rights.

The courage of black heroes stems from the support they receive from their community. When a leader knows that he has a community on which he can rely, he gets the psychological resources to continue the fight. Jefferson's determination and recklessness is due to the support he receives from his people. He realizes that he is not lonely and understands the noble and important role he is playing for his people. Dying as a human being is the precious gift to his people. His self-sacrifice has two goals: the first one is to encourage Blacks not to fear the white administration in so far as the success of their fight depends on their determination. The second goal is to insist on the dignity of Blacks, their human qualities, their intelligence, all of which qualities are useful to take part in the development of the society. Apart from heroism, education appears as another field for Blacks to demonstrate their intrinsic qualities as human beings.

2.2. Education as a means of Racial Equality

A Lesson Before Dying presents education as a way for black people to claim that Blacks and White enjoy equal rights. In the novel, Whites deny Blacks' aptitude to think, belittling them among the rank of animals. Gaines' black characters go against that dehumanization to show that they are right-minded people who are able to have coherent and adequate reasoning. In "Bayonne", noticing that the great difference between Whites and Blacks is knowledge, education comes up as an opportunity to fill this handicap. Blacks decide to send their children to school in order to be educated to help their community. Grant went to university and returned to the Parish of St Raphael in "Bayonne" to transmit his people knowledge and skills necessary for their social well-being. While teaching his students, he indicates his goal in these terms: "... to make responsible young men and ladies"(P 31).

Through the notion of responsibility, Grant wants his students to grow as self-determined people who show abilities to defend the rights and interests of the black community. Being responsible for him means that his students must resist and overcome racist practices that dehumanize them. As such, they should no longer accept domination and marginalization. They should be respected as intelligent and skillful people useful to the American society. Grant wants his students to thrive and transcend the low-class jobs for which they have been exploited for years. Grant himself is given a high social status and is respected by both Whites and Blacks because of his higher education.

When Grants meets Sam Guidry, the sheriff in charge of the prison where Jefferson is kept, he faces a dilemma: Must he behave as a teacher or as a nigger? For him, showing too much intelligence will be considered by the sheriff as an arrogance or pride, that is, an insult to him. However, showing a lack of intelligence will also be a greater insult to himself and to his people. He wisely chooses to wait and see the way the conversation will develop before making a decision. During their conversation, the sheriff notices Grant's smartness through the elevated level of language. Conjugating a verb, Grant says "she doesn't" (P 37). The sheriff is astonished because he thinks that Grant would say "she don't". Grant reports their conversation as follows: "I used the word doesn't again, but I did it intentionally this time" (P 37).

The insistence with which he uses the word "doesn't" in his conversation can be analyzed at two levels: the first level is that it is an evidence of his high qualification. There is no reason why he should be envious of Whites in terms of knowledge. He can converse with Whites in equal terms. Secondly, his insistence stands as a resistance to white domination and contempt. The sheriff would prefer Grant to say "she don't" to stress his ignorance. Grant shows him that Blacks have long been exploited by Whites because of their lack of knowledge. Now that they are also highly educated, they are no more hung-up.

During their conversation, the sheriff puts several questions to Grant who cleverly answers him by avoiding the trap set by the sheriff to test his level of instruction. In the end, the sheriff asserts: "Maybe you are a little too smart for your own good" (P 38). The sheriff's questions are a kind of examination to assess Grant's intelligence in order to imagine the influence he can have on Jefferson. Because he notes and fears the black's smartness, he asks him: "What about the preacher in the quarter? Can't he visit him?" (P 37).

The preacher is Reverend Mose Ambrose, the pastor at the plantation church, with no adequate formal education. For the sheriff, since the preacher is less educated than Grant, he cannot convince Jefferson to change his mind that he is not a hog, but a human being. The sheriff allows Grant to visit Jefferson when he realizes that he has no valid argument to prevent such visits to the prisoner. As an educated man, Grant has the difficult task to teach Jefferson on the value and the meaning of dignity and humanity. He wisely tells Jefferson that he represents the hope and the future of the whole black community. He induces Jefferson to humanize his behaviors and thoughts in order to destroy an old standing white myth that considers Blacks as inferior species: "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. You can prove them wrong" (p 159).

Grant's inspiring words convince Jefferson to stop acting like an animal. Contrary to his previous wild behaviors, he takes steps toward recovering his dignity. His claims of his humanity following Grant's eloquent appeal show that he has internalized Grant's thoughts and feelings. Grant has bravely accomplished the task he is entrusted by the black community, as he succeeds in inverting white ideologies that destroy the humanity of Blacks. Grant's achievement shows that education wields enormous power in people. With his knowledge, he restores blacks' humanity. J. Williams also notes the contribution of education to the advancement of Blacks in his statement that: "education represents hope for black America to ameliorate centuries-old forms of discrimination" (1978, 266).

The character of Grant shows that education raises as an opportunity for Blacks to access knowledge about the society they live in and have critical views about any social and political events. Education permits them to understand ideologies differently from the Whites' understanding. It also enables them to set values which are specific to them as well as their humanity. Just like education, religion helps complete Blacks' humanity.

2.3. Religion as an Asset for Blacks' humanity

In the novel, religion plays a crucial role in the fight undertaken by Blacks to recover their dignity and humanity. The fiction presents religion as a rampart against the process of dehumanization. Reverend Mose Ambrose, the black pastor at the plantation church, in his sermons, induces his congregation to trust in God who poses as the source of hope, change and rebellion. He insistently says that believing in God yields comfort and offers the possibility to take step toward fighting the injustices in the white-dominated society. The black church is then a term used to describe both a specific religious culture and a socio-religious force that has shaped protest movements (V. Taylor, 2017).

When the black people of "Bayonne" face injustices and when their humanity is denied, religion becomes both an instrument of fight and an answer to oppression. Faith in God constitutes one of the most significant factors that contribute to the restoring of their dignity. Gaines's novel lays a particular stress on the role of the black church pictured as an important carrier, and they give their suffering to God in the hope that of receiving answers not only in this life, but also in a life after death. With his consistent references to Jesus and the image of crucifixion, the novel discloses that man's death can be a meaningful event that bolsters the community. He associates Christian imagery with

Jefferson. The black community tries to convince Jefferson to believe in God. The process of evangelization begins with praying sessions in his cell with the ultimate goal to save his soul after his death. To give him the strength and dispel the fear of death, they base their argument on the Twenty-Third Psalm which stipulates in the first verse that “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want;” the sixth verse indicates: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Resting in peace after death is the final aim that people in general and Christians in particular want to reach. Jefferson is convinced that there is a better life after death. That is how he decides to face it with courage by comparing himself to Jesus. He frequently mentions the date set for his execution, which is on Friday, between twelve and three p.m, which coincides with the time of Jesus’s crucifixion. Next he asks “A whole gallona ice cream” (P 139), as his last supper. Jesus Himself, on the eve of his death, had his last meal with his disciple to urge them to have love for the others. For the love of his people, Jefferson accepts to bear the cross like Jesus. In the New Testament, Jesus cross symbolizes the intersection of love and justice. Bearing the cross for Jefferson is to face the realities and difficulties of life he experiences in his living environment. He has to defend his people who are suffering unjustly under cruel masters. In allusion to Jesus’s cross, Jefferson’s death expresses the hope of future generations. Through his suffering and his death, Jefferson destroys wrong opinions about Blacks in order to restore truth. He reaches his goal when he asserts: “Yes, I’m youman” (P 188).

Like Jesus, Jefferson has wrongly been sentenced to death by a society that hates him. He represents the potential for human change, and the way in which he goes to his death does good to his community. Seen as the savior of his community, Jefferson becomes a Christ figure dying like a martyr. He courageously faces his death with dignity. By comparing Jefferson to Jesus, the novel shows how important he is to his community. Through his death without moaning and shivering, Jefferson shows the potentiality of Blacks who are ready to die for the defense of their belief and conviction. His death changes the opinions of Whites about Blacks who are no more seen as animals, but rather as humans able to defend vital principles.

Paul Bonin, a young white deputy worker at the jail in “Bayonne” recognizes Jefferson’s bravery the day of his execution. This recognition is a great honor and a deep admiration that the deputy has for him. Jefferson commands the Whites’ respect. In similar ways, Jesus was hated and rejected by Roman scribes when He announced that He was the Son of God. At His death on the cross, the roman soldier in charge of keeping a watch on Him, confessed: “Assuredly, this man was the Son of God” (Math 27:54). Like Jesus who is restored in His dignity of the Son of God, Jefferson is also restored in his dignity as a human being. The two characters have succeeded in inverting the negative opinions their respective oppressors had about them. Considered as an impostor by Roman scribes, Jesus is now truly seen as the Son of God. As for Jefferson, previously called a hog, he is now regarded as a human being.

Conclusion

Ernest Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying* highlights the difficult living conditions of Blacks in a country that denies their humanity. Racism and its corollaries like racial segregation and stereotyped images prevail in the country. Whites treat Blacks like sub humans with no rights for their social blossoming. In that suffocating environment, Blacks do not act as resigned victims. They stand against the obstacles set by the white people. With heroism and bravery, they destroy the ideologies and myths that wipe them out. Affirming their full human nature and qualities, they prove their worth and show that they are equal to Whites. Their heroic acts to assert their humanity of the result in death, but they die as martyrs for a brighter future of their communities.

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