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# "I was born too late to believe in your God": The Struggle Against Religion in Ernest J. Gaines's *Of Love and Dust* and *A Lesson Before Dying*

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“I was born too late to believe in your God”:

The Struggle Against Religion in Ernest J. Gaines’s

*Of Love and Dust* and *A Lesson Before Dying*.

By

Matthew D. Towles

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of

Arts in English at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, May, 2000

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## Chapter I: The Generation Gap in the Writings of

Ernest J. Gaines

The strange mixtures of opposites in the south often provide a fast-moving culture not easily recognized or categorized. As stated in the *Literature of the American South*, “. . . [S]outhern writers of the past sixty years have created remarkably mobile images of human beings transformed by and transforming a changing world and a vastly altered South” (Andrews 587). These images have not necessarily mirrored southern culture, but they have indicated of the rate and variation of change in the southern experience. Although the change is extreme at times—whether political, religious or social—the “southernness” of a piece of literature or event in history can still be recognized. The *Literature of the American South* goes on to state, “What links [contemporary southern writers] to their southern predecessors are shared signs and symbols—linguistic and cultural—emerging from southern experience, past, present, and future” (Andrews 587). These “shared signs and symbols” link not only the writers to their predecessors, but to the reader and scholar as well. Thus, when one studies a work of literature from a sub-region of the south, the “shared signs and symbols” become incalculably important.

Ernest Gaines said in an interview entitled, “Folklore and Ethnicity,” “I never think of myself as, number one, a black writer, quote ‘black,’ or ‘Louisiana black,’ but as a writer who happens to draw from his environment what his life is, what his heritage is” (Gaudet and Wooton 81). Gaines’s plantation “environment” in his novels draws from the reality of plantation life experienced in the first half of the twentieth century. Life for

Louisiana, often serve to polarize the society into pro-religion and anti-religion members who either raise their level of survival or lower it, according to their allegiances.

The religious oppression that underscores many of the struggles in Gaines's fiction occurs in the plantation setting. Although the plantation is a staple in southern literature, Gaines approaches the subject by investigating the Louisiana plantation, with its whites, blacks, Cajuns, and Creoles. As he writes, Gaines showcases the separation of the races, even in the physical organization of the quarters. From separate entrances into the store on the quarters to different churches, the races are clearly divided in Gaines's novels. Gaines highlights this separation along with other separations of activities in the community. Specifically, the separation of churches promotes a sense of "us against them," the people in the black community against non-blacks. Gaines's social order places blacks on one side and non-blacks on another. The tension the religious oppression creates often erodes into a civil war within the black community. The dichotomy which exists in the black culture concerning Christianity is a source of conflict throughout Gaines's fiction: one group of blacks—older, more traditional—lives by it; the other—the young rebels—would rather die than acknowledge it. This tug-of-war over the state of the religious status quo may be traced throughout his fiction. Gaines's works emerge, not as fantastic morality tales, but as complex stories set in a real culture based upon realistic situations brought about by religious oppression.

Thus, Gaines's works carry an importance that other novels may not have-- historicity. This historical reality permits Gaines to assume certain themes and story lines in his works. Gaines's use of the different aspects of the plantation setting allows different levels of conflict to develop within the story: racial, religious, economic,

academic; and so on. However, the treatment of religion is one of the most intriguing subjects within his works. As Christianity is the most prevalent religion in the south during the time periods about which he writes, it is also the most common in his works. In his first work *Bloodline*, a collection of stories published in 1963, Gaines showcases the type of struggle against oppression that the black person in the south experiences. In "The Sky is Gray," Christianity is the form of white oppression, and an escalating discussion takes place in a dentist's office between a black "preacher" and a young black man reading a book, who disagree about the method of retaining dignity in the black community:

"Show me one reason to believe in the existence of a God," the boys (sic) says. "My heart tells me," the preacher says. "My heart tells me" the boys says. "My heart tells me. Sure, My heart tells me. And as long as you listen to what your heart tells you, you will have only what the white man gives you and nothing more. Me, I don't listen to my heart." (96)

Gaines illustrates in this scene the frustration of many of the characters in his works. The white man oppresses the blacks on and off the plantation through Christianity, but the struggle against white oppression culminates in fights between the blacks. To the rebellious characters in Gaines's fiction, Christianity is used, as the young man says later in his argument, "To keep you [the preacher and other blacks] ignorant so he can keep his feet on your neck" (97). The young people are suspicious of any method of self-improvement that involves religion; they simply do not understand the older generation's religious beliefs: "I was born too late to believe in your God" (102). The young man's

declaration demonstrates the chasm which exists between the generations in Gaines's fiction.

The nature of this struggle, while significant in the history of African-Americans, is somewhat subdued on Gaines's plantations. Larger issues, such as traditional separation of the races, freedom, and education, seem to take a greater role in the narratives. However, religion is in his works in well-placed symbols and in the actions of characters who choose not to rebel. Religion, and more specifically Christianity, in his works serves as a line drawn in the sand, a standard which separates people according to their beliefs in what will produce a better life. As in the above passage from "The Sky is Gray," the older people in the fiction usually support Christianity, while the younger generation—often more educated and more worldly—tend to bristle at the admonishments to obey and to have faith in religion. As Lee Papa states, ". . . Gaines is concerned with the personal test of religion; his characters reassess and reappropriate religion in order to accept it on *their* terms, not on terms imposed by the community and through institutional Christianity" (187). As Gaines's black characters "reappropriate" Christianity on their terms, the struggle intensifies and the status quo of white oppression and subsequent rebellion moves toward a breaking point. This opposition to Christianity does not often deal specifically with Jesus Christ, the New Testament, or other Christian philosophies. Rather, the Christianity in conflict is usually symbolized by the church, a preacher, or other Christian rituals and traditions.

Thus, it is the *system* of Christianity that is in conflict with many of the characters' freedom, not necessarily the philosophy of Christianity. Papa continues, "For Ernest Gaines's characters, the Christian church exists as a system of white



oppression, whereas the denial of the church and the rejuvenation of a personal and communal religion become parts of the route to freedom and the realization of self” (187). To continue the example of the confrontation in the dentist’s office in “The Sky is Gray,” the young man questions the preacher’s religion not because of its invalidity, but because “a white man told you [the preacher] to believe in God...” (97) and because the preacher had never questioned it. The young man objects to Christianity because it is not tested in the minds of the African-American believers and because it is a white man’s religion. He sees Christianity as another method of oppression to which African-Americans subject themselves.

Gaines uses this model of religious conflict in many of his other works. For example, *Of Love and Dust*, his novel about an interracial love affair published in 1967, ends in a losing battle of heroic proportions: a rebellious young man, Marcus, dies fighting for the right to be with his love, Louise. Marcus’s life on the plantation seems to be a series of struggles against tradition on the plantation, highlighted by the religious beliefs of the residents. Thus, Marcus, caught on a plantation that continually pressures him to be what the owner, overseer, and workers of the plantation want him to be: subservient to the religious system. The other inhabitants on the quarters do not question the decisions made by the overseer, nor do they seem to pass judgment on the status quo. They obey the power of the overseer because of their “Christian” ideal. As Marcus is caught in this fight, he is trapped struggling against not only the white power, but also against the oppressive religious constraints the overseer and others on the plantation have employed to ensure docility. As in “The Sky is Gray,” Gaines uses religion to emphasize separation among young and old people in their combined struggle for dignity.

This struggle of one man against the plantation's religious system occurs as well in Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, published in 1993. Grant, a teacher, is asked to convince Jefferson, a convicted murderer, of his own humanity. Unfortunately, Grant is faced with obstacles from his aunt and Jefferson's grandmother, who believe that only the religious know how to treat people, and that Jefferson rebels against God when he does not listen to the pastor. By rebelling against his aunt's opinions, Grant rejects the religious tradition of the plantation and the older people. This tradition has influenced Jefferson, but Grant tries to reverse that influence before Jefferson dies. While Gaines pits family members against one another instead of strangers, the struggle is still polarized between two sets of oppressed people, and the people who rebel suffer.

The plantation is often regarded in Gaines's works as both a home to the subservient and a hell to the rebel. The pattern developed in "The Sky is Gray" is perpetuated throughout Gaines's works. Most of the black characters in *Of Love and Dust* and *A Lesson Before Dying* regard rebellion not only as wrong culturally, but wrong in the Christian sense. The rebels see Christianity as a tool for the white people to keep the blacks ignorant, without dignity. As the struggle for dignity is played out in Gaines's realistic way, two groups choose how they develop their humanity: one group bowing to the religious status quo, another group fighting against it. However, both Marcus and Grant choose to rebel against the religious tradition of the plantations to retain a real part of their humanity.

Chapter II: "They ought to have more love in this world"

Ernest J. Gaines begins *Of Love and Dust* with a simple plantation scene, but ends it with an event that forever changes the lives of those who live there. Jim, the narrator, is a character who lives between the two factions at war on the plantation: Marcus the rebel against everyone else. As Jim tells his story, religion is intermingled throughout the narrative by Gaines's depiction of the characters' experiences, the conventions on the plantation, and other subtle devices, but religion is not an obvious theme automatically. Religion is simply part of the background of the lives of most of the other characters—like the haze that dust and heat create—an infrastructure supporting the status quo. As Gaines states in his 1986 interview with William Parrill, "[Religion's] always there, like the color of the skin" (186). On the plantation, religion is a framework for almost every rule or tradition, the power of which controls many people on the plantation who either believe in the religious tradition or who adhere to its tenets simply from habit. Marcus, the rebel figure who is purchased from jail, does not understand the power of religion, nor does he adhere to its tenets. Marcus attempts to rebel against authority, while he struggles against the continual opposition he experiences from the other black people—most of whom have accepted the religious restraints through direct agreement or through a disinterest in rebellion. Thus, as Marcus lives on the plantation, he must not only fight against the white people who exploit the black people through the religious lifestyle; he must also fight against the black people who subject themselves to religious exploitation.

Marcus's journey to the plantation where his godmother, Miss Julie, had served Marshall Hebert seems to have an inevitable tragic ending. As Marcus is a young man who rejects the religion his godmother embraces. His release from jail is like being taken from one prison to another. As Marcus talks to Jim, Marcus voices his displeasure at the thought of staying on the plantation:

“Shit,” [Marcus] said. “I got news for all of them. That overseer and Marshall Hebert, too.”

“Yes?” [Jim] said.

“They think I'm go'n stay on this fucking place any five years, they got another thought coming.”

“They figure it'll be about seven years,” [Jim] said. “After you get through charging at the store, it might be more than that.”

“Shit,” [Marcus] said. “Seven years from now I won't even remember the name Hebert.” (30)

To Marcus, life on the plantation is a continuation of the prison enslavement and the unfair religious system he has encountered throughout his life. Even Miss Julie says that “they forced [Marcus] to fight that boy” and that he has been unfairly charged with murder (12). Nevertheless, Marcus finds himself on the plantation whose culture is in direct opposition to his values, and he rebels against the religious system because he sees himself as coming from a different era, a person who is used to silk instead of the “convict shit” the other people wear. Because Marcus's standards are not based on the religion of the plantation which preaches docility, he continually looks for, and finds, ways to rebel.

Although Marcus does not meet Marshall Hebert until later, he is the man behind the culture Marcus hates. Hebert typifies the white Creole plantation owner who seems to have little control, yet his power is widespread. The conversation between Jim and Miss Julie in the beginning of the novel demonstrates the god-like persona Hebert has on the plantation. When Miss Julie tells Jim she is sick, he says, "You look good." And she replies, "I've made peace with my Maker." Immediately after, there is an uncomfortable pause and she immediately asks Jim, "How do you get along with Marshall?" (12). Although the change in topic is abrupt, Miss Julie connects her thoughts of God with her thoughts about Hebert himself.

Ironically, Miss Julie's placing thoughts of Marshall Hebert with her words concerning her "Maker" is not an isolated incident whereby Hebert is connected with God. Jim talks about the "Old Man" who "quit listening to man a million years ago" (51). Jim's distaste for the "Old Man," or God, is shown a few times throughout the novel as the human "Old Man" simply plays chess or solitaire and ignores the pleas of the people on the plantation. Jim's idea of the "Old Man," an aloof God who does not care about the pain experienced on the plantation, coincides with Jim's perception of Hebert, who rarely interacts with the people of the plantation under his authority. In addition, Gaines links the term "Old Man" directly to Hebert when Sindney Bonbon, the Cajun overseer on the plantation returns after taking Marcus to the trial. Bonbon is shocked because Marcus is declared innocent. Further, Bonbon is a little angry because he suspects that Hebert is behind the verdict. When he goes to Hebert's house, he says, "Where is the old man?" (254). The term "Old Man," referring to both God and Hebert,

suggests a position of power that everyone on the plantation—including Marcus—recognizes belongs to Hebert.

This position of power allows Hebert the opportunity to use Marcus's stand against the plantation religion to his advantage and to Marcus's disadvantage. Hebert's god-like authority is evident in some of the actions he takes on the plantation. To those who worship in the church, God is seen as a powerful authority who dispenses either blessings or judgment. Hebert uses these powerful, god-like traits as he tries to control Marcus. In his first scene in the novel, everyone on the plantation is getting paid by Hebert except Marcus, who is forced to keep working: "Marshall was sitting behind a little gray table with the roll book and the money on the table in front of him. . . . [The] line of people waiting to be paid stretched from the end of the gallery almost to the mouth of the quarter" (83). This quasi-worship service, with its line of people waiting for the blessing from the "Old Man," is something from which Marcus does not benefit. Hebert's omnipotence is felt because, as he is blessing the others with their money, he is cursing Marcus by making him work while others get paid. This scene clearly shows the separation between the establishment—the old, religious people—and Marcus—the rebel. Since they are docile and compliant to Hebert's wishes, they get paid while Marcus, because of his rebellious nature, is forced to work extra time.

The next indication of Marcus's separation from the older generation occurs when he is brave enough to enter Hebert's house to ask him a favor. Because Marcus is a field worker, he is expected to show humility when walking into Mr. Hebert's house. Thus, Bishop, the black hired servant in Hebert's house, represents the ultimate subservience in his interaction with Hebert. Bishop is described as "[a] little man with a

shining bald head,” always wears a “seersucker suit or a plain white suit” (214). Bishop, with his head shining as if it had a halo around it, seems to think only of the propriety of his own actions and the actions of others. Through his clothing, a direct reflection of Hebert’s seersucker suits, Bishop pays homage through imitation to his boss, the “Old Man.” “Brother Bishop,” as Aunt Margaret calls him, is an aloof character, as he stays close to the big house, never going near the quarters until he walks to tell Jim what Marcus has done. Religion to Bishop is the same religion that Miss Julie practices: the established religion. For Bishop it is not only church on Sunday, but also an ever-present thought, picture, or even smell that pervades life on the plantation. Even Bishop’s attitude toward Hebert’s house takes on a holy dimension that comes close to sacrilege: “Bishop went to church every Sunday, but he didn’t look to God for his strength. He looked to the big house up the quarter” (222). Bishop’s reward is based on the culture’s religious system, but his strength is found in that big house, and Marcus’s intrusion into that house jeopardizes every true belief that Bishop has. Bishop acts as an archetypal bishop to Hebert: one who upholds the standards of the plantation and who represents the respect and power of the “Old Man.” Marcus’s rebellion against Hebert’s house and authority is a true affront to Bishop’s religious world. If Marcus fails, he is a heretic who deserves death; if he succeeds in his rebellion, he is a demi-god worthy of worship. Either way, Bishop’s world is destroyed because Marcus “pushed his foot in . . . the house that slavery built” (215).

The primary method to retain Bishop’s world on the plantation is to destroy Bonbon’s, the overseer’s, power. Hebert’s master plan for Bonbon’s destruction comes into clear focus only when he notices Marcus. Although Hebert grants Bonbon’s role as

overseer, he does not control Bonbon. Jim is one of the first characters who fully understand Hebert's intentions: "So [Hebert] makes Bonbon work Marcus like a slave so Marcus can get mad enough to kill [Bonbon]?" (220). Thus, Hebert sees Marcus as Marcus sees himself: as a method or an avenue to change the status quo on the plantation. As Miss Julie says, Bonbon "go and come like he want" (14). Bonbon's immoral actions on the plantation serve a paradoxical role: the religious people must ignore him to survive. Since docility from the black people is a major part of the religious system of the plantation, Bonbon as overseer is an integral part of the religious life. As Bonbon reinforces the religious status quo, then, for both Hebert's and Marcus's benefit, he must be taken out of his position. This coup against Bonbon forces the plantation into an upheaval, which results in Marcus's death.

Marcus's struggle against the plantation religious system brings him directly in opposition with the overseer, Sidney Bonbon. Bonbon's name, literally meaning "good good" in French, is an obvious misnomer. Bonbon not only has a hard-driving character; he is also a thief and adulterer who uses the power given to him by Hebert and by those who choose to obey his authority. Throughout the novel, those who supposedly uphold Christian values continually allow Bonbon to live the way he wishes. For instance, Pa Bully and Aunt Ca'line, although not regular members of the church like Aunt Margaret, uphold the traditions of the plantation and at least think "they ought to be in church" (59). One of the major plantation traditions Pa Bully and Aunt Ca'line condone through their silence is the sexual terrorization to which Bonbon has subjected the women workers, specifically Pauline. Although Bonbon and Pauline are in love during the time Marcus is on the plantation, there was a time where Bonbon would "call [Pauline] over



into a patch of corn or cotton or can or the ditch—the one he was closest to—and make her lay down and pull up her dress. . . . then after he had satisfied his lust, he would get back on the horse like nothing had happened” (62). As noted in the text, Bonbon believes he has a “right” to do this, and Pa Bully and Aunt Ca’line condone his behavior with their silence—specifically, Aunt Ca’line, who says, “‘Mr. Grant’ warningly” (62) every time Pa Bully mentions something about Bonbon’s visits to Pauline.

Unfortunately, Marcus cannot ignore the blatant sins of another, especially if the person sinning is in control of Marcus’s work schedule. Marcus’s life seems to draw dark secrets of others from hiding places, and while Aunt Ca’line warns Pa Bully about talking about Bonbon and Pauline’s affair, Marcus’s first move is to try to ruin their relationship. Fortunately for Marcus’s sake, Jim tries to warn him first: “‘She’s Bonbon’s woman.’ ‘Well, that sure don’t cut no ice with me,’ he said. ‘It better,’ I said. ‘It cut ice with everybody else in the quarter’” (55). Marcus rejects the plantation life which subjects him to the religious system enforced by Bonbon. As Aunt Ca’line and Pa Bully use silence as a method to reinforce harmony within the plantation, Marcus uses rebellion as a way to destroy the corrupted members of the society, which is controlled and overseen by Bonbon.

The black community on the plantation is restricted by Bonbon’s actions; thus, the standards of the believers are continually compromised as the community strives to ignore Bonbon’s sins at the same time they are obeying his commands. This division of loyalty promotes confusion in the black religious community. Gaines states in the William Parrill interview that the younger part of society does not believe that the church is useful, and that “the church [is] the institution which has kept the older ones going. . .”

(145). Not only does Marcus not see the church or the gospel as preached and practiced by the members of the plantation society as a source of togetherness; he also sees the church as a source of stagnation, which forces Marcus into a rebellious role. As Marcus rejects the black people who support religion, he simultaneously rejects the oppressive religious atmosphere which continually surrounds him. However, Marcus does not simply approach the “Old Man” in charge and start his rebellion. He begins his fight against the other people who suffer from the oppression.

As the rebel figure in the story, Marcus’s rejection of the religious oppression comes at the cost of meaningful relationships with other characters. Marcus quickly rejects those people whom Marcus sees as accepting the oppressive lifestyle. He does not have the ability to accept anyone who lives outside his standards of freedom. For example, as Marcus is being driven to Baton Rouge by Jim Kelly to get his clothes, Marcus shows his disdain for people who are like Jim, those who accept the oppression:

“You’ll get used to it,” [Jim] said.

“Not me,” [Marcus] said. “If they think I’m go’n stay here any five years . . . ” (6)

As the conversation continues, Marcus believes that Jim is Marshall Hebert’s “whitemouth,” or his informant against the black people on the plantation. This kind of rejection repeats itself throughout the novel as Marcus assumes people are on Hebert’s side if they accept the oppression on the plantation. Further, the people whom Marcus rejects are more religious than Jim—yet Marcus dismisses Jim because Jim has his religious background, too. Marcus automatically rejects people like Miss Julie Rand,

Aunt Margaret, and even Jim, who have been influenced by the religious lifestyle of the plantation.

Even if Marcus sees a corruption of religion in someone's actions, he believes that person is tainted and weak. He disdains anyone who recognizes and supports the religious status quo. Although Jim is not a fanatic like Miss Julie, he still bears the taint of Christianity:

I got on my knees and made the Sign of the Cross, then I got into bed.  
 Long time ago I used to say the whole prayer, but that was long ago when  
 I was young and when I thought the Old Man was going to do it all for me.  
 But now I know I have to do it for myself. Still, I make the Sign of the  
 Cross every night to stay in practice. Who knows? Maybe I'll go back to  
 the full thing again some day. (19)

As Jim performs his nightly ritual, Marcus enters the room and stands over him demanding hammer and nails. Marcus is not only irreverent regarding prayer; in addition, he is disrespectful to Jim's status as the elder worker in the room. Marcus is not considerate of Jim's opinions and he does not believe he has to pay his dues as the new man on the plantation. For example, most of Marcus's first night is spent keeping Jim awake hammering. As Jim says, "He must have nailed against that wall a whole hour before he had strung up that one little piece of wire" (20). Thus, Marcus is not docile to those like Jim who want to help him, and he makes relationships difficult. Marcus rejects the advice Jim offers him and the place in society into which Jim attempts to place him. From spiritual insight to material goods, Marcus resists most of the things Jim gives him.

Unfortunately Marcus is not used to working the long, hard hours on the plantation. He is quickly outworked by the two other men in the field, John and Freddie, who “. . . knew they could kill him off any time they wanted to” (27). After a hard day’s work, Marcus tells Jim he plans on running away. He delivers one line that summarizes his philosophy on the sociology of the plantation: “They don’t nut this kid like they done nut all the rest of y’all ’round here” (30). In other words, everyone on the plantation has been abused and oppressed by the corrupt use of religion that he will soon reject. Further, he does not trust anything provided on the plantation, whether given through kindness or through manipulation. While the people take the religion of the plantation—Jim’s “Sign of the Cross” or John’s and Freddie’s “shouting” in church—as part of the life of the plantation, Marcus rejects as poisonous anyone who lives that life. Thus, anything Marcus will trust while he lives on the plantation will be something he takes by force or by ingenuity—not by faith.

Marcus does not limit his rejection to the people who follow the religious traditions. The very habits and conventions of the plantation seem to be stained with the religion that Marcus finds deplorable in Miss Julie and Aunt Margaret. He simply does not trust the lifestyle of the plantation, including the clothing people wear. In short, Marcus’s resistance is a complete one, without gaps or compromise.

Although clothing seems to be a small detail, Marcus does not see it as such. The first day of Marcus’s work, Jim tries to help him adjust to a working man’s “uniform.” “Playboy Marcus’s . . . short-sleeve green shirt and a pair of brown pants” (25) do not conform to the clothing of any person who works on the plantation, whether it is John and Freddie—who wear the standard khaki—or the serious-minded old women who wear

“dresses and big yellow straw hats with a piece of rag or handkerchief under the hat”

(26). The uniform of the plantation reflects the acceptance of the oppression that the people experience, and Marcus—especially at the beginning—is not ready to bow under the pressure. Marcus’s stubbornness is seen clearly in Jim’s narrative:

I jumped off the tractor and ran inside to get the straw hat because I was already late. While I was in there I got a khaki shirt too and brought it out and threw it in the trailer where he was. He didn’t pick up either one; he didn’t even glance down at them; he just stood there with his arms folded and his back against the side of the trailer. (26)

Marcus sees Jim’s attempt to do “everything a good Christian (one who had once believed) could do” (37) as a desire to break Marcus’s rebellious spirit. Marcus does not trust anyone who uses the customs and ways of Miss Julie and Aunt Margaret. Marcus seems to despise and reject the simplest and the most sensible methods of living, merely because they represent to him a deterioration of his personal character and a conformity to the standards of the religious people he dislikes. Marcus rejects the clothes, not because he thinks they are unfashionable, but because refusing them is the un-Christian thing to do.

Miss Julie Rand, the character who most thoroughly accepts the plantation religion, is in South Baton Rouge for most of the novel. As a former house worker and cook in Hebert’s home, Miss Julie has a sentimental attachment to her memories of the plantation. Although she realizes that the plantation can be as dangerous as the penitentiary for Marcus, she believes he can improve from “[t]he open air and . . . people who care. . .” (11). However, Marcus and his godmother Miss Julie do not share the

same sentiments about the plantation, nor do they seem to have a very good relationship. As Marcus enters Miss Julie's house—he returns to retrieve clothes and other belongings to take back to the plantation—he does not reciprocate the affection she gives him: “An old lady who must have been eighty or ninety was patting Marcus on the face. Marcus didn't like it, but the old lady was so happy to see him she couldn't stop” (8). He seems to have rejected her caresses long ago, and their meeting is a series of sincere actions by Miss Julie that Marcus ignores. Marcus does not seem to like Miss Julie while she wishes he could stay at her house and be safe. As Miss Julie introduces herself to Jim, she discloses a part of their relationship that Marcus probably does not like: “‘I'm Miss Julie Rand,’ she said. ‘I christened Marcus’” (8). Her pronouncement that she “christened Marcus” is part of her greeting to Jim. The pride she exhibits in the part she played in Marcus's christening seems to be more important to her than the other roles she plays as surrogate mother and grandmother in Marcus's life.

The role of religion in Miss Julie's life is fully explained when she brings Jim into her room to ask him to take care of Marcus when they return to the plantation. They enter the “small, ill-smelling room that had too much furniture [where] no matter what wall you faced, you saw pictures of Jesus Christ” (10). Although Jim is somewhat uncomfortable in this room, Miss Julie wants to talk to him while they are symbolically surrounded by Jesus. As Christ watches their conversation, Jim says little, but has cynical thoughts concerning Miss Julie's capacity to recognize the reality of Marcus's life. As Miss Julie becomes more comfortable and honest in that room, Jim restricts his actions and his speech as he sits quietly for most of the conversation. The pictures of

Jesus, taken from old calendars, seem to be reminders of years past that Miss Julie had spent on the plantation.

When Miss Julie interacts with Marcus, this past seems to enliven her while it subdues him. Marcus comes in her house disinterested, and he leaves exhibiting the same lifeless reaction with which he arrives: "Marcus didn't say a word. He let her hold him and cry over him, but he didn't open his mouth. She followed us to the door and waved again just before I drove away. Marcus didn't even look back; he just sat there like he was half dead" (18). Marcus's reaction to Miss Julie is disrespectful and sad, but he does not seem to see her; he sees the plantation system that religion has sustained. She came from that plantation life, and her brand of religion is the only brand that Marcus knows. By getting Marcus out of jail and sending him to the plantation, she has sent him to a religious environment that does not provide the kind of comfort or deliverance from pain Marcus needs. Miss Julie seems to desire a salvation experience for Marcus. She knows that the penitentiary can "kill a man," but the plantation has "open air" and "people who care" (11). Thus, for Miss Julie, his transfer from the penitentiary to the plantation is a chance for Marcus's redemption. However, Marcus seems to recognize the weakness of the plantation's version of the power of Christ, and he rejects it every time he encounters it.

Thus, one of Marcus's greatest obstacles comes when he encounters Aunt Margaret, the strong Christian woman who cares for Tite, the daughter of Bonbon and his wife Louise. As he tries to seduce Louise, Aunt Margaret strives to uphold and support the moral authority on the plantation. As she foresees the tragic outcome of Marcus's and Louise's relationship, she continually attempts to maintain her Christianity. As

Winifred Stoelting states in “Human Dignity and Pride in the Novels of Ernest Gaines,” “Margaret . . . maintains a dignity in her determination to live as a Christian among confusing forces” (357). Those “confusing forces” include the flirtations of Marcus and Louise. When Marcus is attempting to seduce Louise, he knows that he must outsmart Aunt Margaret to get his opportunity. His methods include befriending Tite and working diligently on his yard work. However, as soon as Aunt Margaret stops thinking about Marcus and watching him and “thought about church [for] the next day,” Louise begins to prepare her bedroom for Marcus’s arrival (156). Ironically, Margaret’s religious thoughts bring about the destruction of the religious status quo because Marcus and Louise begin to prepare for their affair when Margaret begins to think about church. As Jim says, “[if] they found out about him, every man, woman and child’s life would be in danger . . .” (171). Thus, the beginning of Marcus’s first offensive against the army of Christian “soldiers” who defend the religious status quo on the plantation is a master plan executed, ironically, under the watchful eye of Aunt Margaret, who sings Christian songs and thinks about church. As she encounters Marcus, she reacts as if he is an evil to be avoided, even to the point of not touching him, she cannot even slap him.

From this struggle between two characters with philosophical differences concerning how the people on the plantation should live, Gaines showcases the two methods of struggling with religious oppression: Margaret copes by forgetting, and Marcus copes by remembering and trying to remind everyone of the oppression. When Margaret confronts Marcus and Louise with the reality of their situation, Marcus is not afraid: “‘Let her talk, honey,’ Marcus said. ‘Let her get it off her chest. We don’t worry ’bout what she think’” (207). The authority Margaret enjoys in the company of religious



people diminishes in Marcus's presence—she shows it in her response to both of them: “Y'all grown people, and y'all white and y'all black. And there ain't no North for y'all. There ain't nothing but death—a tree for him; and as for you . . .” (207). Marcus's plan for freedom is so complex and horrible that Aunt Margaret stutters through her unfinished sermon. She knows she will survive and they will not.

After Marcus dies, she tells Jim her secret to survival in the oppressive world of the plantation:

“Yes, you have to leave,” she said, nodding her head thoughtfully.

“I know,” I said, eating.

“You see, you won't forget,” she said.

“I can't, Aunt Margaret.”

“That's why you got to go,” she said. “You'll just keep reminding him.”

“You forgot already, Aunt Margaret?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she said. (279)

Marcus's inability to forget, his determination to retain his humanity even under the strictest religious oppression, makes him a target, not only for Marshall and Bonbon, but also for Aunt Margaret, too. Marcus cannot live with the abuse; she refuses to acknowledge it.

Marcus's never-ending battle against the oppression of the plantation religion of the overseer's comes in its most violent and destructive form when he encounters other people. Marcus does not seem to consider the others on the plantation, their opinions or their futures. As Jim says, “[e]very man, woman and child's life would be in danger”

from Marcus's relationships. Marcus is an equal-opportunity rebel, ruining the lives of both men and women. However, he uses different styles of rebellion when he encounters men than when he encounters women. Marcus's dealings with men—namely Jim, Bonbon and Marshall—often culminate in a continual back-and-forth verbal jousting session which often ends in an angry verbal exchange or Marcus's abrupt exit. Conversely, Marcus does not confront women—Miss Julie, Aunt Margaret, Pauline and Louise—directly but he uses them as weapons for his rebellion, or he ignores them completely.

When Marcus attacks the male religious authority on the plantation, he uses the women as weapons of battle. Marcus encounters different types of females, from saint to whore. He dismisses the saints of the plantation—Miss Julie and Aunt Margaret—because they have so much faith in the religious mandates that they have allowed their rebellious natures to fade, leaving a docile shell behind them. On the other side, women like Tick-Tock who, in the words of Jim, might “[g]ive you a piece if you treated her right” (43), were so far removed from the religious world that Marcus bothered with them less than he paid attention to the saints. However, Marcus uses the women who are caught between heaven and hell. These women simply agree with the religious oppression because they are afraid to speak out against it. Unfortunately for Marcus's desire to escape the plantation alive, these two women are Pauline, Bonbon's mistress, and Louise, Bonbon's wife.

Marcus's first dangerous move against the religious establishment occurs when he notices Pauline. Since the fear of the rest of the people “don't cut no ice” with Marcus, then he must realize that the people are afraid of Pauline because of her connection with

Bonbon. As Bonbon is there to enforce all the rules of the plantation, Pauline becomes Marcus's primary target. After he notices Pauline and decides to "[take] that black woman," his attitude toward work changes noticeably. Jim explains Marcus's transformation:

How could a white man—no, not even a solid white man, but a bayou, catfish-eating Cajun—compete with him when it came down to loving. So now he was glad Bonbon was there on the horse. He was glad the horse was so close he could feel his hot breath on the back of his neck. He was glad he could hear the *sagg-sagg-sagg* of the saddle every time the horse moved up. And even that hot, salty sweat running into his eyes couldn't make him hate Bonbon. (57)

Marcus has suddenly changed from a young man full of hate to a revolutionary who plans to change the entire plantation from one of complete compliance with the ways of Bonbon, the enforcer of the religion of the "Old Man," to a plantation of free-loving rebellious people who will survive to live freely. The work, the heat, and the overseer that he hated are now replaced with the goal of bringing that "catfish-eating Cajun," Bonbon, to the low level on which Marcus believes Bonbon should live. The embarrassment of Marcus's affair with Louise—or with Pauline—would, in Marcus's opinion, dismantle Bonbon's power structure.

The people on the plantation do not follow Marcus, nor do they necessarily believe a revolution should occur. As stated before, Aunt Margaret, Miss Julie and Brother Bishop all believe in the religious system that separates Marcus from them. Ironically, this same religious system helps unite Bonbon and Pauline, and, in some small

ways, the church indirectly shields itself from their affair. For example, Bonbon visits Pauline during the prayer meeting, and the prayer meeting serves as a backdrop to their adultery: “Aunt Ca’line and Pa Bully pretended they hadn’t been listening to anything. Farther up the quarter the people were singing in the church” (64). Thus, the sounds of the singing provide a diversion for the people like Aunt Ca’line and Pa Bully, who would rather listen to hymns being sung in a church than the type of tune Bonbon and Pauline were singing together as lovers. Thus, the people in the church are worshipping while Bonbon and Pauline have sex. The congregation uses the hymn singing as a shield from this sin, while the two old people must ignore the sin to carry on. The plantation people have three choices: to use religion as a shield, to ignore the oppression, or to fight it.

However, Marcus does not realize that Pauline herself believes in this system, too. Pauline “didn’t go to church, but nobody had ever heard her saying anything against it” (63), so, in an indirect way, Pauline upholds the religious status quo by not speaking out against the church. Like Margaret’s forgetfulness at the end of the novel, Pauline forgets the pain that she must endure to survive on the plantation. Pauline’s love affair with Bonbon is not only a moral difficulty; the affair also makes it difficult for her to maintain relationships with other people on the plantation. Further, she replies to those in the quarter “who pretended she was sinning more than any of them had ever done” by saying, “If he had chose you, where would you be right now?” (63). When Marcus approaches her with his desire to begin a relationship, she knows from the beginning that she has invested too much in her relationship with Bonbon to bother with Marcus. Her rejection of his advances is confusing to Marcus: ““What’s the matter with you?” he said. ‘I been working up there all night like a slave, like a dog—and all on ’count of

him. What's the matter with you?" (98). Pauline has committed herself to the religious side and Marcus simply does not understand her.

After this encounter with Pauline, Marcus rarely mentions her because Monday, at "twelve o'clock, Marcus started looking at Bonbon's wife" (109). Marcus's ability to switch from one woman to another not only shows his ability to adapt; it also shows that he is focused on the goal. Because he only wants the upheaval of the religious system of the plantation, he does not care whom he uses to destroy it. Jim shows Marcus's thought processes as he refocuses his rebellion after the setback Pauline delivered: "How could he hurt Bonbon? How? How? Wait; wait. Yes—sure. Bonbon had a wife, too, remember. Yes, that's right, he had a wife. And some kind of way he would get to his wife" (117). Marcus knows that if he "hurts" Bonbon, he hurts the status quo Bonbon protects. Yet, Marcus's method of seduction changes little from Pauline to Louise; he likes the direct approach. He simply approaches Louise and says, "Madame Bonbon," and bows to her (120). His use of her last name is ironic here: she is Mrs. "Good good" for a very bad purpose, at least for the people of the plantation. Jim, having observed Marcus's actions, shows his allegiance to the religious system of the plantation and his displeasure by yelling at Marcus. He replies, "'Now, what you cussing me for?' . . . 'All I did was speak to the poor little suffering thing—there you going round cussing me. They ought to have more love in this world'" (121). "They" are the religious people on the quarter. Marcus's sarcastic response to Jim's reprimand shows the lack of respect he has for the religious mores of the plantation. The white man has set up—and the blacks follow—the strict code of ethics: blacks marry blacks and whites have sex with anything that moves. Marcus's rebellion against this code is not only a community rule broken; it

is a religious rule broken. “They” are the opposite of Marcus; they are the religious community. While Marcus struggles against these opposite forces, he uses women as the weapons in his rebellion.

Gaines’s novel, *Of Love and Dust*, does not end with the outcome Marcus has planned. Marcus’s plan to leave the plantation still works—Bonbon kills Marcus and he goes to the cemetery. Even his burial is overseen by a preacher who echoes Marcus’s earlier vow to leave the plantation as soon as possible: “Man is here for a little while, then gone” (281). While Marcus meant to leave the plantation with freedom from the religious system of the people, the preacher’s words emphasize that death is the only freedom for Marcus. Thus the old, religious people like Aunt Margaret and Bishop stay with the system that has kept them alive on the quarters. Their docile lifestyle has placed them permanently under Hebert’s, the “Old Man’s,” power. As Karen Carmean states, “Bishop’s position as guardian means that he believes in the rightness of the system that constructed and maintains the house” (51). Everyone who stays and accepts the religious control of the plantation is like Bishop, a guardian of the system. Thus, when Marcus fights, he fights individually against people like Miss Julie, Aunt Margaret, and others, while he fights corporately against the religious system that created the individuals.

When Bonbon and Jim leave after Marcus’s death, Marcus wins a bitter, philosophical victory for Marcus. With Marcus’s death comes an end to the rebellion; though for the most part, Marcus fights for himself, the plantation is changed forever. For instance, Jim speaks to Bonbon after the trial and “all the human understanding we had had between us was over with now. He saw this in my face and I could see how it

hurt him” (278). Throughout the novel, Jim has hovered between the old faction which believes in the religious system—whether by action or apathy—and Marcus, who desires complete freedom from the system. Yet, when Jim speaks to Bonbon for the last time, Jim breaks those ties, automatically placing himself with Marcus, the man who took Bonbon’s wife and his job. Jim’s switch to Marcus’s philosophy is important because it creates an anomaly in the plantation system: the old people believe in the system, the young people rebel. Thus, Marcus’s rebellion does not stop with his death. Rather, it continues as long as Jim remembers the oppression, just as Marcus remembered the oppression.

Gaines in *Of Love and Dust* does not provide a gallant figure who fights against all odds for all the people. Marcus’s battle is fought against an entire plantation for one purpose: Marcus’s freedom. Further, his death brings more attention to his cause, but it does not promote unity. Placed in a time period when, as Gaines says in an interview with John O’Brien in 1972, “[t]he church was only concerned with sending someone to heaven rather than with creating social change” (37). Marcus’s rage against the unspoken power of religion seems a little extreme to some like Aunt Margaret. However, the religious characters against whom he fights show the reason why he fights for himself—they, the religious people, do not fight at all.

Thus, the conclusion of *Of Love and Dust* shows how little the major portion of the religious infrastructure is changed. Mr. Hebert is not prosecuted, so his leadership is strengthened because Bonbon leaves the plantation. Therefore, his power base—the docility of the black people—still exists. Those who obeyed and respected his leadership still live on the plantation. Sadly, the characters who have the best opportunity to change

the religious status quo must leave. Aunt Margaret's ability to forget the pain of the past showcases the type of lifestyle Marcus cannot bear, yet it still exists after his death. As stated before, while Marcus cannot live with the abuse, the old, religious people on the plantation refuse to acknowledge it.



### Chapter III: Dignity from Death: The Journal for Life

Ernest Gaines's body of work contains characters who seem to be unable to live in an religiously oppressive atmosphere. While Marcus in *Of Love and Dust* is a good example of the character who struggles against individuals who support the status quo, other characters fight within the religious system of the plantation. For instance, Gaines's novel *A Lesson Before Dying* foregrounds the struggle of Grant, a schoolteacher on a plantation, who continually struggles against the individuals as against the institutions they support. Marcus struggles against individuals on the plantation solely for his own personal freedom, while Grant fights against individuals and institutions for his own personal freedom and for the freedom of future generations of black people on the plantation.

Ernest J. Gaines's novel *A Lesson Before Dying* contains characters similar to those found in his other works like *Of Love and Dust*, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, and *Bloodline*. While the theme of dignity is not explicitly stated in these earlier works, it is *A Lesson Before Dying*'s main theme. The novel's question of how dignity is obtained echoes similar battles fought in other works by Gaines. For example, the story "The Sky is Gray" in *Bloodline*, focuses on the separation of the generations with regards to religion, but it also demonstrates the different methodologies used by the two groups when they both strive for dignity in an culture in which the religion supports oppression. The young man who argues with the preacher says, "[some] way or the other I'm going to make it" (97). His words do not have the faith the preacher demonstrates

when he says, “Best not to even try [to understand fate] . . . [God] works in mysterious ways—wonders to perform” (95). Thus, the young man and the preacher demonstrate the dichotomy between the young and old black communities’ methods to obtain dignity. The young group tries to work hard and earn dignity through education, reducing the importance of religion, while the old blacks wait and obtain it through struggle and faith, depending on the religious structure.

This dichotomy is a main theme of *A Lesson Before Dying*. Grant, a young teacher on the plantation, is asked by his Tante Lou to make sure that Jefferson, a convicted murderer, knows he has dignity before he dies by electrocution. Unfortunately for Grant, his aunt believes that allowing Jefferson to realize he is human requires that Jefferson have a religious experience, and Grant does not agree with her. Throughout the novel, Grant must struggle against the major institutions of religious control on the plantation: the school, the big white house, the legal system, and the church. Only after Grant challenges those institutions in his life does he become a real advocate for Jefferson, and only then does Jefferson become a human being who recognizes his own dignity.

The first institution against which Grant struggles is the school in which he works. As the schoolmaster, he is elevated above the other blacks on the plantation, but he does not hold a high position in the white community. For instance, when Grant goes to the big white house to ask permission to see Jefferson in the prison, he is reminded that he must go to Mr. Henri, and “Mr. Henri won’t come to see [Grant]” (18). In contrast, Mr. Henri’s black errand-boy, Mr. Farrell (who is really a grown man), treats Grant with tremendous admiration: “[Mr. Farrell] had known me all my life, and he

knew my aunt and all my people before me, but since I had gone off to the university and returned as a teacher, he treated me with great respect” (40). Mr. Henri’s and Mr. Farrell’s viewpoints regarding teachers on the plantation provide their different reactions to Grant. The white people see education as an opportunity to impart religion as a means to ensure docility and as a way to perpetuate stereotypes within the black community. However, the older, less educated black people see education and educated people as a method of deliverance from the oppressive plantation life through the means of religion. Unfortunately, Grant agrees with neither hypothesis.

As Grant teaches the plantation children, he struggles simultaneously against the religious substructure on the plantation. As Valerie Babb states in her essay, “Old-Fashioned Modernism: ‘The Changing Same’ in *A Lesson Before Dying*,” “Although his aunt, Miss Emma, and many of the older members in the quarters can draw strength from their religion, Grant cannot believe as they do” (257). Grant’s inability to believe in the organized religion on the plantation causes problems for him in his vocation as well as in his relationships to the others on the plantation. The physical components of religion and education underscore their interrelated qualities; the church and the school are similar in that they share the same building, the attendees learn roughly the same things, and the traditions in both institutions are timeless.

Grant’s struggle to eliminate the overwhelming religious influence begins when he goes to work every day. Grant’s description shows the blurred line that barely separates the church and the school:

My classroom was the church. My classes ranged from primer to sixth grade, my pupils from six years old to thirteen and fourteen. My desk was

a table, used as a collection table by the church on Sundays, and also used for the service of the Holy Sacrament on the fourth Sunday of each month. My students' desks were the benches upon which their parents and grandparents sat during church meeting. (34)

Grant's use of "church" for school is ironic, since he no longer attends the church services on the plantation, yet he teaches in a school he considers a church. Grant intermingles the description and use of the furniture for the school and for the church, indicating that he sees no real difference between the two. Thus, as he teaches, he has the religious leaders of the community figuratively looking over his shoulder:

There were three pictures on the wall behind the altar. One was a head-and-chest black-and-white photo of the minister in a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie; the other two pictures were color prints of Jesus: *The Last Supper* and Christ knocking on a door. (34)

Grant's job is overseen not only by the Superintendent of Schools, but also by the preacher and Jesus himself. As he is virtually "micro-managed" by the many institutions, both religious and secular, of the plantation, Grant voices his frustration to his girlfriend, Vivian: "I need to go someplace where I can feel I'm living. . . . I don't want to spend the rest of my life teaching school in a plantation church" (29). However, Grant's desire to leave the plantation and its rules is not directed solely to his teaching position: Grant resents the church's overseeing the education of the young black men on the plantation.

Thus, as Grant observes the plantation, he realizes the tragic cycle into which these pupils are being placed. For example, when Dr. Joseph, the superintendent, visits

the school, he comments, "Place looks about the same" (53). Since the place looks the same, then the learning in the place must continue to be the same, regardless of the teachers or the pupils. As Dr. Joseph inspects the students, he requests one of them to recite a Bible verse. When the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd," is recited, he has "heard that one" (54). Obviously, the learning within the school is very similar to the learning going on in other "colored" schools. The scene after Dr. Joseph leaves portrays the type of ignorance the church-school perpetuates, as the first load of wood is delivered to the school. The older boys in the school are required to chop up the wood that the men on the plantation have delivered. As the boys "laughed and kidded each other," Grant wonders:

What am I doing? Am I reaching them at all? They are acting exactly as the old men did earlier. They are fifty years younger, maybe more, but doing the same thing those old men did who never attended school a day in their lives. Is it just a vicious circle? Am I doing anything? (62)

Grant knows that these boys probably will not have the same opportunity he has to escape the religious stranglehold of the plantation and to find another life. They, like their fathers and mothers, will return to the church to worship at the altar of ignorance and oppression as long as the preacher in the "dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie" oversees the education.

Thus, as Grant questions the "vicious circle" of the plantation, he begins to recognize the uselessness of his efforts. As Grant watches the boys chop the wood, he remembers his own school days. Matthew Antoine, his teacher, told Grant and his fellow pupils that most of them would "die violently, and those who did not would be brought

down to the level of beasts” (62). As hopeless as Mr. Antoine’s prediction was, the lives of Grant’s schoolmates have fulfilled Antoine’s prophecy. Linking the thoughts of his own school days to his present pupils, Grant foresees the same end, as his students are restricted by the religion that oversees their education. To emphasize this point, Grant realizes that the Christmas pageant, performed every year, has the exact elements that the previous year’s production contained:

I had heard the same carols all my life, seen the same little play, with the same mistakes in grammar. The minister had offered the same prayer as always, Christmas or Sunday. The same people wore the same old clothes and sat in the same places. Next year it would be the same, and the year after that, the same again. (151)

Grant’s apathy regarding the students’ learning stems directly from the religion that controls the school. He does not foresee anything but what his teacher foresaw for him: violent destruction. The cycle for Grant and his students begins and ends with the religion that houses his school and the pastor who controls both—the religion and the education.

As the teacher on the plantation, Grant is the primary choice to convince Jefferson he is a man, at least from Miss Emma’s and Tante Lou’s viewpoints. However, for Grant, Miss Emma, and Tante Lou to gain permission to visit Jefferson they must ask Henri Pichot, the Creole plantation owner. His household is much like the school and the church: a seldom-changing entity which the plantation people, white and black, treat with respect. Thus, the power of Pichot’s big white house comes from the tradition of the plantation. While Grant receives respect from the black people like Mr. Farrell, Mr.

Pichot has power over both the religious and the legal institutions which control the lives of the black people.

To ask permission from Mr. Pichot to see Jefferson, from Tante Lou's perspective, "ain't just another day" (17). Grant is placed in an awkward position by being asked to go to Pichot's house. First, Miss Emma, Pichot's former washer woman, and Tante Lou, his former cook, had changed Grant's and their relationship ten years before: They told Grant, "Me and Emma can make out all right without you coming through that back door ever again" (19). As an educated teacher, Grant had earned a status above the two women that he must put aside the day he visits Pichot's house, which he has not visited in the six years he has been teaching on the plantation. When Miss Emma asks Pichot to go to the sheriff's office to allow visitation rights to be given to them, Grant reveals how Pichot thinks about Grant:

He looked over her head at me, standing back by the door. I was too educated for Henri Pichot; he had no use for me at all anymore. But just as Miss Emma had given so much of herself to that family, so had my aunt. So Henri Pichot, who cared nothing in the world for me, tolerated me because of my aunt. (21)

As the leader of the plantation, Pichot knows the powerful effect the religious life has on the plantation. Pichot sees Grant as one who has left and who has seen another world outside the vicious cycle of the religion-controlled life on the plantation. Thus, he "had no use for" Grant anymore, though he still has a "use" for the black people on the plantation who have accepted their position in society. Because Miss Emma and Tante

Lou have accepted their roles on the plantation—at least up to this point in their lives—he is willing to “tolerate” Grant for their sakes.

However, as he speaks to Pichot, Grant has difficulty giving Pichot the respect he is usually given. Miss Emma’s and Tante Lou’s desire to influence Jefferson’s character irritates Pichot. He avoids giving them any promises and he begins to question Grant harshly: “And what do you plan to do?” (21). Grant’s reply—“I have no idea”—is not in the “proper manner,” so Grant adds a “sir” to the end (21). The conversation quickly develops into an uncomfortable verbal exchange between the educated black man and the powerful white man. As Pichot has the power, he quickly retreats to religion, the institution on the plantation which the women respect the most: “Let [Reverend] Mose visit him, and keep it at that . . . “ (21). He goes on to say, “At this point, I would be more concerned about his soul if I were you” (22). Miss Emma replies, “I’m concerned for his soul. But I want him be a man, too, when he go to that chair” (22). This reply is definitely out of the ordinary. Pichot’s friend Louis Rougon, who is listening to this entire conversation, “could not believe what he was hearing” (22). These two women—both had been directly connected with Pichot’s powerful white house for years—have come into its sanctuary and said near-blasphemous words. They recognize the inability of the church—as it exists on the plantation—to bring about social or even personal regeneration. Pichot’s plantation church cares about Jefferson’s “soul,” but not his status as a man. Thus, Miss Emma and Tante Lou do not ask for a reprieve from the sentence of death, just from the sentence of inhumanity. They realize only education can accomplish that reprieve during Jefferson’s time on death row.



The women's brave step into Pichot's antebellum house to ask about a black man's humanity is not the only shocking event in this scene. Although everyone in the room knows that Pichot has the power to make their request known, he does not grant it, nor does he refuse it: "I'll speak to [Sam Guidry, the sheriff] . . . . But it's up to him, not me" (22). Pichot's refusal to make the decision under those circumstances continues when Grant goes back the next day to get Guidry's answer, and Guidry is the only white man who asks Grant questions regarding the visit. Thus, as they stand in Pichot's kitchen, Pichot does not say a word; the power of the church on the plantation has not stopped this request for humane treatment, and Pichot cannot respond. Further, Guidry also has difficulty with the request, because he, like Pichot, asks if the preacher could visit Jefferson instead of Grant. However, Guidry finally displaces the power of religion and allows Grant a visit in "a couple of weeks" (50). Yet Guidry's reply has one exception: "You can come up there," Sam Guidry said. "But the first sign of aggravation, I'm calling it off. You understand?" (50). Guidry bluntly voices his concern: ". . . I don't like it. Because I think the only thing you can do is just aggravate him, trying to put something in his head against his will. And I'd rather see a contented hog go to that chair than an aggravated hog" (49). Guidry does not seem to care whether a religious person visits Jefferson, as long as the outcome of the religion on the plantation remains the same: contentment.

Since Grant left the plantation for an education, others notice he is not content with his environment. Thus, although he is allowed to go to the jail, he is ordered by the sheriff not to put anything "in [Jefferson's] head against his will" (49). Further, Pichot thinks Grant has coerced Miss Emma and Tante Lou into requesting visitation rights to

Jefferson for him. Thus, the two symbols of white power, Pichot and Guidry—who usually depend on religion to keep the black people docile—do not understand the women’s desire for Jefferson to die like a man. The religious control over the plantation started weakening when Grant returned from his education. Religion’s grip on the community—especially on those women—is slipping with every visit to Jefferson by Grant which occurs without the blessing of the church.

Although Pichot and Guidry are concerned about the preacher’s not visiting Jefferson in jail, Miss Emma and Tante Lou also recognize the need for the preacher’s presence; however, the women simply want Grant to visit Jefferson first. All through their preparations to go to the jail, they promise to pray for one another; as Tante Lou says, “This way is best” (67). Their faith in the church is not shaken simply because they prefer Grant’s visit to Jefferson over the preacher’s visit. As Philip Auger states in “A Lesson about Manhood: Appropriating ‘The Word’ in Ernest Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*,” “The way in which [Tante Lou], [Miss Emma], and Reverend Ambrose learn to deal with such oppression is through their faith and in the institution of religion” (77). This religion, supported by the white people on the plantation, will allow, as Sheriff Guidry says, “a contented hog go to that chair [and not] an aggravated hog” (49). Auger continues: “Grant, however, sees religion as doing little to produce change” (77). Grant has left the plantation and he has seen alternate ways for black people to live. As Miss Emma and Tante Lou have not been educated, they depend on the faith of their religion. Thus, they see the only way that Jefferson can die like a man is for Grant to visit him. To them, religion is for those waiting to live forever in heaven while suffering

on the plantation. Social justice does not come through the plantation's religion; it comes from education.

Thus, as Grant enters the jail to start Jefferson's humanity lessons, he is continually confronted with the denigration of his status as the educated teacher. As such, he does not conform to the other black people on the plantation who have simple faith in the religion provided. Grant voices his frustrations to Tante Lou:

Everything you sent me to school for, you're stripping me of it . . . [the] humiliation I had to go through, going into that man's kitchen . . . [now] going to up to that jail. To watch them put their dirty hands on that food. To search my body each time as if I'm some kind of common criminal. Maybe today they'll want to look into my mouth, or my nostrils, or make me strip. (79)

Grant's frustration is focused on the duties he must perform to fulfill his obligation to his aunt. Putting aside his pride and his education, Grant views the task his Aunt Lou has given him as a step back into the vicious oppressive cycle in which he, at one time, and now his students live. As Grant's students were forced to show their teeth and hands to the Superintendent, Grant now fears he will be checked by these white people who perform duties resembling "slave masters who had done the same when buying new slaves . . . and cattlemen doing it when purchasing horses and cattle" (56). Grant learned about those practices at college, so he has the knowledge to support his misgivings about his treatment. Further, Grant refuses to believe that persecution from the white people—or anybody—will be wiped away in heaven or at any other time. Thus, Grant follows

his own mind, which is not swayed by the white people's persecution nor led by the black people's religion.

Although Tante Lou and Miss Emma know Grant will not bring Jefferson to a religious awareness as Reverend Ambrose will, they still expect a religious awakening in Jefferson, no matter how small. For example, when Grant visits Jefferson on "Termination Sunday," Grant returns to face numerous questions from the two women and Reverend Ambrose, as a result Grant is able to focus his relationship with Jefferson and, conversely, what Reverend Ambrose and the women expect from the visits to the jail. Because the women and Ambrose are at church while Grant visits Jefferson, the Reverend's question develops into a small sermon for Grant's benefit. Reverend Ambrose asks, "Anything I ought to take him?" Grant replies, "Food, I suppose. Maybe some clean clothes. I can't think of anything else." "I was thinking more about the Bible," says Ambrose (101). Clearly, Reverend Ambrose wants to chastize Grant as well as to offer Jefferson a method of salvation from an eternal doom. However, Grant does not believe that religion can save Jefferson from going to the electric chair as a "hog," and he is not willing to use the Bible or Ambrose's religion to help Jefferson. As Herman Beaver states in *Wrestling Angels into Song*, "Gaines's characteristic distrust of religion is evidenced by Grant's unwillingness to [utilize] folk religion as a personal resource" (177). Grant thinks of Jefferson's needs primarily in terms of human necessities such as clean clothing and conversation to ease the passage of time, while the Reverend concentrates on ensuring Jefferson's safe passage to the next world.

Grant's first attempt to provide Jefferson a sense of humanity is giving him a radio for his jail cell. The importance of the radio, from Grant's viewpoint, is evident

when he speaks with Jefferson about some of things Jefferson wants before he dies: news from the quarter, fruit, a gallon of ice cream or a radio. They finally decide that a radio would allow Jefferson to have, as Grant says, “music all the time” (171). The radio, specifically the radio show *Randy’s Record Shop*, plays music that Tante Lou believes is “sinning music” (171). Thus, the radio provides for Jefferson an alternative to the church music that the ladies and Reverend Ambrose prefer.

The radio also provides an outside source of information to which Jefferson and the other prisoners have not been privy. With the radio, Jefferson can tune into stations from “as far west as Del Rio, Texas, and another as far east as Nashville” (175). Grant is giving Jefferson an opportunity to become educated from a source outside the religious stronghold of the plantation. While Grant is not actively opposed to religion, he does not believe it will work to bring Jefferson dignity. Thus, while the visits to Jefferson’s cell from Miss Emma and Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose are filled with talks about religion and Jefferson’s life after death, Grant focuses on the life that Jefferson would prefer to live, a life free from the thoughts of death. As Grant attempts to explain to Jefferson that all people die, Jefferson voices his frustration at the continual focus on death by replying viciously, “Tomorrow, Mr. Teacher, that’s when you go’n die? Next week?” (129). Grant cannot reply to Jefferson as completely as Jefferson wants because Grant seems to be confused as to the purpose of his visit. As Grant says earlier in the novel, ““Do I know how a man is supposed to die? I’m still trying to find out how a man should live. Am I supposed to tell someone how to die who has never lived?” (31). With the radio’s help, Grant attempts to show Jefferson—a man who has truly never

lived—how to live from the examples of the outside world, including the radio music and talk shows.

Because Jefferson takes lessons from the “radio classroom,” Reverend Ambrose, Miss Emma, and Tante Lou are not happy. When they visit Jefferson for the first time after he receives the radio, he has not turned the radio off for two days. Thus, when the ladies and Reverend Ambrose want him to come out of his cell to visit them, he refuses, so they must come to him. After the visit, the description of the scene suggests the results of Jefferson’s conversation with the ladies and Reverend Ambrose:

Forty-five minutes later, when Paul returned to the cell, he found the radio turned off and Jefferson lying on his side, facing the wall, his back to the people. The deputy opened the door to let them out, and Jefferson turned from the wall and snapped on the radio. (179)

Jefferson has literally turned his back on the religion that had baptized him and in which he develops. However, the message of the outside world becomes more appealing to him as he is forced to confront death, the Reverend’s favorite topic of conversation. When the Reverend is questioned about Jefferson’s soul after this visit, he “lowered his eyes and did not answer” (180). The Reverend believes that Jefferson cannot afford to take the time to learn the lessons of the outside world, such as those from the radio, and he wishes that he could teach Jefferson more about the Bible.

Yet the Bible’s message and the message of the “sin box,” as Ambrose refers to the radio later, cannot exist in the same place. One voice must be clear while the other voice is silent. Thus, when Ambrose and the women confront Grant about the radio, both sides fight for the exclusive right to Grant’s time:

“Jefferson needs something in that cell,” I said. “Yes, he do,” the minister said. “You hit the nail on the head, mister. Yes, he do. But not that box.” “And what do you suggest, Reverend Ambrose?” I asked. “God,” the minister said. “He ain’t got but five more Fridays and a half. He needs God in that cell, and not that sin box.” (181)

Ironically, only Reverend Ambrose and the ladies can bring God to Jefferson’s cell. However, their anger against Grant for purchasing and providing the radio increases simply because their message of religious docility is broken by the “sin box.” Even the sheriff realizes the danger of the radio when he asks whether Jefferson had given the ladies and the minister any trouble after it is delivered to the cell. The sheriff, who exemplifies the whites on the plantation, and the Reverend are both wary of the radio and its message, not because of its effects on Jefferson, but because their messages of being docile and religious are silenced by *Randy’s Record Shop*.

As the religious message is silenced, Grant takes advantage of his opportunity and offers Jefferson a pad and pencil to “write [Jefferson’s] thoughts down” so that Grant and Jefferson can talk about them when he returns. As Reverend Ambrose takes a secondary position in Jefferson’s education, Grant assumes control as the teacher. When Miss Emma, Tante Lou, the Reverend, and Grant visit Jefferson together, Grant takes Jefferson aside to teach him lessons about friendship, the definition of a hero, and the definition of a myth. The meaning behind Grant’s lesson is simple: Jefferson can destroy the white man’s myth by being a hero to the black community and walking to the electric chair like a man, not like “another nigger—no dignity, no heart, no love for your people” (191).

Grant continues his lesson by defining the enemies Jefferson must face to overcome the myth.

The first enemy is the white man who “never thought we were capable of learning” about dignity, identity, loving, or caring. (192) Thus, as Jefferson encounters the white community in the prison—the sheriff and even Paul, the nice guard—he must continually promote his own humanity to them. Grant continues to say, “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” (192). “They” is, of course, the white community, but it also includes the institutions the white man controls, such as religion.

Grant’s final lesson refers to the direct link between the control the white man retains through the myth and the position Reverend Ambrose fills as the minister on the plantation. As they circle the common area, Grant explains that the white community—he uses the sheriff as his example—does not respect Grant as the teacher or the Reverend as the preacher. The reason the white community does not respect either person—or the institution each controls—is that those institutions are powerless. Grant teaches the same things he was taught, and most of the children do not learn well. Further, the pastor says the same prayers, and promotes the same ‘Termination Sundays that seem to do little communal good for the black community. Thus, when Grant brings Jefferson the pad and pencil, the sheriff grins, because “what can a hog do with a pencil and paper?” (192). The sheriff depends on the weak religion that controls the school. However, Grant has broken the myth—no doubt with the help of his education—and is now teaching his first pupil a lesson which can really be of use on the plantation—dignity, love, and respect. However, since the Reverend, Miss Emma, and Tante Lou have not been taught this



lesson, they are still accomplices to the crime committed by the white people against the black community. Because Grant's lessons on friendship, heroes, and myths destroy the religious foundation on the plantation, the Reverend opposes them.

Thus, Grant's lesson for Jefferson does not culminate on the day of his execution, but during the days leading up to his final one. As a helping gesture, Grant offers Jefferson the book and pencil. Jefferson's writings are not polished or even logical, but they give a clear perception of his world at the end of his life, and they show which side—Grant's friendship or Ambrose's God—helps him become a man.

The beginning of his writings simply catalogs the daily events of eating and sleeping. However, the first thoughts Jefferson writes encapsulate his life and his responses to religious structures: "it look like the lord just work for wite folks. . ." (227). Jefferson demonstrates his knowledge of the society in which he lives as he realizes that the white people are in control and he is, as he writes, "on my on" (227). The religious community does not seem to offer Jefferson much relief or help during his jail sentence. Thus, as Grant encourages Jefferson to dig deeper to do "A" work, Jefferson begins to realize who his friends really are on the plantation: "mr wigin 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" (228). Jefferson believes he is stunted emotionally by his lack of experience. Grant's teachings offer Jefferson a method of expression no one—not even the church on 'Termination Sunday—had provided before. From this little book and pencil Jefferson is not only developing a sense of humanity, but a thesis upon which other black people on the plantation can formulate the reality of their humanity. The hope found within Jefferson's writing occurs when he realizes that "the a aint too far"

(229). Jefferson knows that the work he is doing with his journal, while crude, will reap “a work” benefits for the black community.

Yet Jefferson’s journal is not simply for the other black people. He demonstrates his most powerful form of dignity when he proclaims, “mr wigin an nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im sombody” (232). Jefferson is not just somebody, but he is somebody who *thinks* he is somebody. Grant’s entire theory of Jefferson’s rehabilitation relies on Jefferson’s ability to think, and thought is something a hog—an animal—cannot perform. Through the use of the journal, Jefferson has demonstrated—in writing—that he is somebody who has the ability to think. With a few pencil marks, Jefferson, though mostly illiterate, has disproved the arguments of the lawyer and Reverend Ambrose, and he has done it alone in his cell—without religion.

Thus, the end of Jefferson’s life is not really an end, but a beginning for those who can read and understand the example set by Jefferson and his diary. The story, however, is not really Jefferson’s; it is Grant’s. Grant is the character who, like the young man in the dentist’s office in “The Sky is Gray,” continually struggles against the relationship between human dignity and the church. The separate institutions—the school, the big white house, the legal system and the church—all serve to force the black characters into subservient roles where they must continue to speak and act as if each is, as Grant says, “another nigger—no dignity, no heart, no love for your people” (191). The cycle of ignorance on the plantation, perpetuated by the black people who support the church, is damaged when Grant teaches Jefferson about another world apart from his little cell.

Even to those who disagree with Grant's methods, Jefferson's journal proves the truth of dignity and humanity; his little book survives as a thesis on dignity for the black people. The older, more religious people believe that, as Reverend Ambrose says, "You'd have strength if you had God" (158), but Jefferson's radio and his journal contradict that message. The Reverend's God, always incomplete without the accompanying institution such as the church or the proper messenger like the preacher, does not affect Jefferson's life. When Jefferson comes to the realization that he has dignity as a human being, the realization is not only apart from the preacher and his message; the realization comes as Reverend Ambrose preaches against Grant's successful message. Thus, the deliverance into heaven for Jefferson does not come when the Reverend leads him there. Heaven is only available to Jefferson when he realizes another world—a type of heaven—that is not preached on the plantation. This heaven, according to Grant, is one that plays *Randy's Record Shop* and offers Jefferson an opportunity to express himself apart from an entity or dogma. Thus, when he becomes a human, Jefferson is as bare and alone as when he was born. Jefferson's rebirth comes with Grant as his midwife, pulling him to a deeper realization of humanity and personal freedom, even as Jefferson sits inside his cell waiting to die.

As Grant provides a means for Jefferson to die with dignity, the arguments between Grant and Ambrose over the use of education or religion become moot. Jefferson's diary provides a view into his thoughts, which demonstrates that the younger generation of blacks on the plantation, represented by Grant, have a method of obtaining dignity without religion. Jefferson's thoughts catalogued in his diary also allows the proof of the power of education to last like a historical record, a book which, to obtain

dignity as a black person, has the potential to replace the word of Reverend Ambrose or even the Bible. The oral tradition evident in *Of Love and Dust*—the entire novel is one man's oral account of Marcus's life on the plantation—is suddenly replaced by a written text in *A Lesson Before Dying*. The lesson in *A Lesson Before Dying* is one of self-reliant hope which is not as clearly evident in *Of Love and Dust*.

#### Chapter IV: Death Cannot Stop It: The Struggle Continues

Ernest Gaines's use of familiar southern religious and cultural themes allows him to create stories which, like the Greek theater, are familiar to the audience without becoming boring or repetitive. Gaines's use of the familiar is described well by Susan Ketchin in the Introduction to *The Christ-Haunted Landscape*:

[Most] people who have grown up in the South are heirs to the rich storytelling tradition common in agrarian, rural cultures. Many southerners have heard countless stories about the people they know and those they are connected to, past and present; these stories form the invisible sinews that hold family, community and land together over generations. (xiii)

Like the stories that "hold the family, community and land" together, Gaines's canon has similarities which hold his works together to form a distinctive body of work, with most of his novels focusing on "southern" themes such as agrarian life, storytelling, and, most importantly to this particular thesis, religion.

Gaines allows religion to become a part of the "shared signs and symbols" of his individual canon. In the two novels, *Of Love and Dust*, and *A Lesson Before Dying*, his treatment of religion and its effects shows opposing struggles, however, with similar characterizations and situations. In *Of Love and Dust*, Marcus's struggle is often with the older people who maintain the religious tradition that enslaves them and keeps them on the plantation. Marcus's freedom from this oppression becomes possible when he

fighters against those who uphold the religious values. In contrast, Grant, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, struggles against institutions more than individuals. Obviously the older people like the Reverend Ambrose and Tante Lou are religious, but Grant seems to struggle against the power the school and the church have over the black people. Although Marcus and Grant are younger people who help bring change to the plantation, Marcus fights more directly against individuals while Grant sees the institutions themselves as responsible for the oppression.

In *Of Love and Dust*, Marcus seems continually to struggle against the older religious characters who parallel those in *A Lesson Before Dying*. For instance, Marcus must ignore or directly oppose religious-minded women like Aunt Margaret and Aunt Ca'line. In comparison, Grant performs his duty to Jefferson at the behest of his own religious women: Tante Lou and Miss Emma. One of the most significant parallels between these two novels is Gaines's description of Bishop from *Of Love and Dust* and of Reverend Ambrose from *A Lesson Before Dying*, who uphold the religious status quo and who fight the revolutionary tactics of the rebellion, with each character sharing physical similarities.

The guardian of the "house that slavery built" in *Of Love and Dust* is Bishop, the committed servant supporting Hebert's system of religious oppression on the plantation. From his "shining bald head" to his defiant support of the religious tradition of the plantation, Bishop seems to be a stereotypical model servant who has worked in a particular house for a long time. However, when Bishop's description is compared to Reverend Ambrose's description, Bishop's character becomes more than just a simple servant. Gaines describes Ambrose as a "short, very dark man whose face and bald head

were always shining” (100). Both men, with their bald heads shining as if they had a halo around them, are, as Reverend Ambrose is described, the “simple, devoted believers” of the plantation. They both rarely show confusion, and they seem to have the power to rally other believers who are in lesser positions of religious authority. Thus, as they struggle against the rebellion presented by Marcus and Grant, these men also portray the stereotypical believers’ leader: one who represents authority, but who does not carry it apart from his religion.

As they confront these two stereotypical “simple . . . believers,” Marcus and Grant have different methods of dealing with the religious adversary these believers present. For instance, when Marcus goes to speak with Hebert, he has no respect for Bishop and the position he holds. They fight with words for control of the entrance to the house while Marcus calls Bishop “nigger” and tries to infiltrate Bishop’s place of power out of “devilment” (210). Because Marcus “didn’t think enough of [Bishop] to get mad with him” (210), Marcus stubbornly refuses to leave until he speaks with Hebert. Thus, when Hebert comes and takes Marcus into the library to talk, Bishop is left alone in the kitchen, calling out Hebert’s name. Marcus is simply rude to Bishop, ignoring Bishop’s station on the plantation so that Marcus can pursue his own rebellion. Thus, Marcus knows exactly who Bishop is and what he represents; Marcus simply does not care.

In contrast, Grant chooses to convey respect to Reverend Ambrose, but only to the point of allowing Ambrose to represent the religious methods of rehabilitation for Jefferson. For instance, Ambrose asks Grant if he has spoken with Jefferson about God and Grant answers, “I figured that’s where you came in, Reverend. There’s enough room for both of us, I can tell you that” (101). Unlike Marcus, Grant wants to fulfill his duty

to his aunt without causing too much stress in the relationships he maintains on the plantation. Grant is the unlikely revolutionary in this book because, while he is completely frustrated and disgusted with the vicious circle of the plantation, he does not seem to want to upset the system to the point of losing the respect of his elders who have faith. Thus, the contrast in the two methods of rebellion is remarkable; while Marcus completely ignores the position in the society Bishop represents, Grant encourages Reverend Ambrose to get involved in Jefferson's rehabilitation. One ignores the religious power while the other encourages its change.

Neither Marcus nor Grant believes as the others on the plantation believe. In fact, Marcus thinks that the people on the plantation have been tricked into their subservient roles (30). Like Marcus, Grant is continually frustrated by the lack of personal respect the religious people accept. To these two characters, the people on the plantation portray too much docility in front of their white overseers. For instance, Grant speaks to Jefferson about self-respect and about the way in which Jefferson can be a "hero . . . someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don't and can't do" (191). Ironically, Grant describes both himself and Marcus as well. Although neither man would admit to the heroism, both of them do something "other men don't and can't do." At the end of *Of Love and Dust*, the plantation is different simply because of Marcus's willingness to be the dubious hero and to die for his beliefs. In comparison, Grant similarly allows himself to become something no one else is willing to become: the person who shows Jefferson how to live before he shows him how to die. The religious people of the respective plantations are not willing to do what these men accomplish by the end of each novel.



Although they fight as heroes against the religious factions of the plantations, the enemies against which they fight are different. Marcus's method of rebellion seems to involve one person at a time. He does not go to where the crowds meet—like the church—to spread his brand of radicalism. Rather, he approaches the people individually to do what he deems necessary for the success of his revolution. Marcus first approaches Jim with contempt and mistrust. Then, he moves to Pauline and finally to Louise. His penchant for an isolated revolution produces an individualized result: only Jim seems to be changed. Although the revolution is small, it produces the results based upon the mechanism by which it survived: individualism.

In contrast, Grant deals primarily with institutions which uphold the religious tradition. He is frustrated with the apathy of the older religious people, to be sure, but he focuses his work against the institution through which he lives and works. Grant encapsulates his philosophy to Vivian, his girlfriend:

“I need to go someplace where I can feel I'm living,” I said. “I don't want to spend the rest of my life teaching school in a plantation church. I want to be with you, someplace where we could have a choice of things to do. I don't feel alive here. I'm not living here. I know we can do better someplace else.” (29)

Grant's difficulty is not with the Reverend or with the sheriff; rather, Grant cannot live his life continually dealing with the entity of the “plantation church.” Grant's campaign for change comes only when he recognizes that Jefferson's legacy will be left in the lives of the people who learn and worship in the same church Grant loathes. Unlike Marcus, Grant's struggle for change includes the other people on the plantation.

Gaines uses these two very different men to accomplish similar tasks. Marcus and Grant both see distinct problems in the religious lives of the older generation who live on the plantation. To these men, the docile lifestyle promotes an inhuman response and inhibits a normal life. The continual work, combined with the social mores which allow Bonbon to have a relationship with any black woman he wants, but prevent Marcus from having a relationship with a white woman, drives Marcus to rebellion and death. Yet Grant becomes a revolutionary from a much different perspective. He has rejected religion a long time ago, yet he still must deal with the institutions which support religious life on the plantation. Merely through his efforts to allow Jefferson to speak for himself, Grant develops his own method of expression. Thus, Grant conveys his lesson of expression to his students.

Ernest J. Gaines writes simple stories with familiar themes set in the plantation life of the 1930's and 1940's which, to many readers, is long past. The religion, which only cares, as Reverend Ambrose says, "about a man's soul," is portrayed as an institution which has little power against the difficulties of plantation life. However, Gaines chooses to use this time period to highlight the docile nature of the black religious people of this time. Thus, the conflict ensues because of the different preference for the types of rebellion. The younger generation prefers open rebellion while the older religious types depend on faith. While the two novels, *Of Love and Dust* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, contain similar characters—especially the older religious types—the rebels change their plantations in very different ways. One chooses to confront individuals while the other has the audience of young children. Neither Marcus nor Grant seems to

understand his role of instigating change on the plantation until the change is done; the religious people only fear it.

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