

HUMAN COURAGE AND DIGNITY IN ERNEST J. GAINES' *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

Rosa Maria Simamora¹, Jontra Jusat Pangaribuan², Linus Rumapea³

¹Universitas Katolik Santo Thomas, ²Universitas Katolik Santo Thomas, ³Universitas Katolik Santo Thomas

Email: ¹rosasimamora1967@gmail.com, ²jontra_pangaribuan@ymail.com,
³rumapealinus@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research is of human courage and dignity in Ernest J. Gaines's novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*. People are able to face threat, pain, danger, or even death in order to maintain their right and dignity relying on courage. This is library research and applies mimetic criticism proposed by Abrams saying that a work of literature is the imitation of the real world. It depicts human beings who struggle to maintain and get acknowledgement of their right and dignity to live respectfully and worthily. The analysis is focused on how courage and dignity have raised someone from desperation into brave and thoughtful to face his death. He is desolated because of a false accusation of being a murderer, compared as a hog, and sentenced to die in electric chair. Comparing to a hog makes him lose his courage and self-esteem. He alienates himself and does not want to speak to anybody, but his godmother disagrees so she begs a teacher to teach him that he is a human being and should die as a human being too. He is taught by a teacher of moral and obligation to face his death courageously and shows that he is a human being who has duty and responsibility. Finally, he is able to sacrifice his death as a symbol of his courage and dignity to himself, his family and community. It is found that the author Ernest J. Gaines vividly conveys human beings who have courage are able to maintain and get acknowledgement of their right and dignity although they have to face threat, pain, danger, or even death.

Key words: Hog, dignity, courage, racism, prejudice, death

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1900s, particularly in the 1920s, Afro-American literature, art, music, dance, and social commentary began to flourish in Harlem, a section of New York city. Historically, the Afro-American writers appear between 1885 and 1900, the most violent period of Afro-American's history when almost 2.500 of the Afro-American were lynched in every three days. This period made some of the Afro-American awake and begun their career as an Afro-American writers composing fiction and poetry to impress Whites with

their humanity and to win themselves a more comfortable place in racial world of America. The Afro-American fiction and poetry did not only raise the issues of freedom, social justice, to prove themselves worthy of equality counteract the ideology of racism and many more that refers to the Afro-American social condition, but also show the beauty, the charm, and the artistic values (Johnson 8).

Ernest J. Gaines is an Afro-American author who explores the full range of Afro-American humanity. His most obvious gift is his extended and refined construction of

the novel as a moral rather than a written text. He is one of approximately sixty writers from around the world nominated for the 2004 Nobel Prize in literature (Payton 1). His background and his knowledge of the folk culture provide him with a framework for his narrative style and for his presentation of individual human beings and their interrelationships. One important difference between Gaines and many other Afro-American writers is that he returned to the South. He also shows both the historical racial conflict between the Cajuns (French- Canadian settlers) and Afro-American and the changes. From his narrative voices, it is clear that he is not the intense anger of many other Afro-American writers. There is both anger and understanding in Gaines, a kind of anger that gives the positive changes of the present (Gaudet 3).

He is a professor of English and writer in Residence at the University of Louisiana at Art and Letters, a member of The American Academy of Art and Letters, and holder of the National Humanities Medal. His fiction has long been critically acclaimed and taught in university and school for the past twenty-five years, and translated into many languages, including French, Spanish, German, Russian, and Chinese. He received national attention and an audience of millions with the selection of his latest novel *A Lesson Before Dying* as the Oprah Book Club selection in October 1997. His contributions to American literature include his mastery of the first person storytelling voice, his use of humor as an essential element of human character and his major contributions to establishing an African-American literature tradition based on the memory of the past (Gaudet 4).

He has written mainly about the Afro-American living in the Southern part of the United States. Through the places in his stories and novels are imagery ones, they are based pretty much on the place where he grew up and surrounding areas where he worked, went to school, and traveled as a child. The theme of his novels and the stories is “an attempt to live with courage and dignity under the deprivation”: survival with dignity, the search for manhood, and a determination to give voice to an unvoiced people, to the making of a new society that respects the dignity of man so that they know they have a power (Sacramento 1). His characters are usually poor, mostly uneducated, and almost very independent. The conflicts in which they usually find themselves is how to live as a man (Aubert : 483).

His novel *A Lesson Before Dying* got many honors including a Pulitzer prize nomination, the best fiction award by three organizations; The National Book Critics Circle Association (1993), The Southern Writers Conference and the Louisiana Library Association, and the October 1997 choice of the month in the “Oprah Book Club”. He was named “chevalier” in the order of the Art and Letters by the French minister of culture for his writing and teaching for the first creative course will be a part of the curriculum at every French University within ten years. The word is one of the most prestigious in the field of arts, rewards persons who have distinguished themselves by significant (Daveau 1). For him, *A Lesson before Dying* is a product of a lifetime of nightmares about execution. It explores the process of an oppressed and dehumanized people attempting to gain recognition of their human dignity, to get acknowledgment of their human rights and

freedom to pursue their dream. It also a powerful essential parole about human condition as accessible and universal a tale as was ever panned (Ringle 1).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Clarification of Terms

Dignity is the quality or state of being worthy, honored, and exteemed. To honour and esteem means to assign human beings with high value. Dignity in human beings involves the earning or the expectation of personal respect of esteem. Human dignity is a way of respect in the form of privacy between each people because they have the same sense of worth and value. Dignity gives an indipidual a sense of value and worth, a high or honourable rank or position, and a part of man comman humanity. The existance of human' night dream started that human beings are aware of each other's worth (Wriston 49).

Courage is the ability of human beings to control their fear when they are in danger, pain, and opposition. Courage not only gives human beings a proud, high spirit and angry temper but also positive values because it covers mental or moral strength enabling one to venture, to persevere, and to be confident. It also take human beings to endure unusual risk and sacrifice the material and soul to help other and to struggle the right of the oppressed people. For example, the freedom of human beings to get a better life and a good education for the poor in the world (Emerson 4).

2.2 Theory

This research applies mimetic theory proposed by Abrams (1975: 8-9) stating that mimetic orientation is the explanation of art essentially the imitation

of aspect of the universe. That art of painting, music, dancing and sculptor, Socrates said are all imitations. Everything is comprehended in two categories, the imitable and imitation. Aristotles in *Poetics* also defined poetry as imitation. It has been stated with compendious clarity by Sydney: 'The poet nothing affirmth, and therefore never lies' (Hough: 1966: 42). Yet the 'imitation' of the poet, though not specific objects with substantial historical existence, are not cut off from the real world. Shakespeare's Othello is not an imitation of an actual man who has actually existed but he is an imitation of a man. Achilles' shield in Homer is not an imitation of any shield at has ever existed before. Yet he is also an imitator: he makes them by analogy with things that have existed. In this case all objects in literature have an analogical relationship to the object in the real world (Hough: 1966: 44-45).

METHOD

This is a library research method where all data are taken from the library and internet. The primary source is the novel, *A Lesson Before Dying* written by Ernest G. Gains, and the secondary sources are collected from literary criticisms, sociological writings, biography, and internet browsing. All these data are taken together to make meaningful interpretation and give good contribution to the research. The novel is studied by making interpretation that it is a life reflection of human condition in real life.

THE ANALYSES

A Lesson Before Dying is a story of Afro- America young man who is accused of being a murder of a white bar

storeowner. He was accused by two white men who came into the store and found him leaving the bar with money and whisky in his pocket so that he was convicted to the crime and sent to the trial. At the trial, his defense lawyer argued that he was innocent but was being at the wrong place and the wrong time: he took the money because of hunger and stupidity. But, the prosecutor argued that he and the two friends had gone to the bar with full intention of robbing and killing. The prosecutor described him as less than a man, less than a boy, and was compared to a “hog”. The judge told him that he had been found guilty of robbery and murder on the first degree and then he was sentenced to die in electrocution.

4.1 Courage

The author creates character Jefferson to represent courage as the ability of human beings to control their fear when they are in danger, pain, and opposition, offers and gives human being moral and mental strength to face their problems in life, and help them to find and learn about humans’ values from the conditions of life they have face. Jefferson is an innocent young man who is trapped and being at the wrong place and at the wrong time and accused to be a murderer and then sentenced to die in the electric chair. At the trial, the public defender describes him as less than a man, less than a thing, and he is compared to ‘a hog’. Those words make Jefferson remain quite and keeps them deep inside, but the word “hog” leads him toward growing awareness of himself as a human being who is worthy and respected. Innocent Jefferson becomes the victim of the racist whites’ hatred and prejudice towards the Afro-American: Twelve white men say a

black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. Justice? (Gaines 157).

However, his death has been decided by the white men and sentenced by a jury of his peers, a group of racist whites, so the author creates Miss Emma who fights for her family’s dignity and struggles for her godson’s right: die as a human being. She feels that the Whites’ decision in the courthouse is unjust for him. She defends his right by taking the responsibility to go to Henri Pichot’s house to get the visitation from Sheriff Sam Guidry.

Having courage makes human beings brave and optimistic, but losing it makes them hopeless and despair. All the public defender’s words to Jefferson, especially the word “a hog” make him hopeless, despair and identifies himself as “a hog”, and the sentence: “death by electrocution” makes Jefferson surrender his soul to nothing. He rages in his cell by mimicking a hog’s behaviour when Wiggins visits him:

“I’m a old hog.” He said. “Youmans don’t stay in no stall like this. I’m a old hog they fattening up to kill.”

“That would hurt your nannan if she heard you say that. You want me to tell her you said that?”

“Old hog don’t care what people say.”

“I’m go’n show you how a old hog eat,” he said. He knelt down on the floor and put his head inside the bag and started eating, without using his hands. He even sounded like a hog (Gaines 83).

Demonstrating how a hog eat horrifies Wiggins and his condition makes Wiggins realize how force the inhumane treatment

he has got which has affected his psyche. In this case, his behaviour becomes irony of the response of maltreatment he has got from the whites. Jefferson's alienation from society makes him cannot find any reasons to live decently knowing that he will be executed. He loses his self-esteem and is careless for his own hygiene: He had not washed his face or comb his hair for days. He wore one of my khaki shirts and a wrinkled pairs of brown pants. He didn't have on shoes. They were stuck under the bunk (Gaines 82).

Gaines uses paradox of the references to Jefferson's eyes "his eyes said" to show Jefferson's mindset of pain and fear, knowing that he is going to die for a crime he did not commit, and uses the repetition of "they were big brown eyes, and the white were too reddish" to show that he is discriminated and oppressed by the the racist whites.

It is not easy for Wiggins to teach Jefferson but he keeps on trying to persuade him to be tough and brave to accept all the possibilities, better or worse. He not only sacrifices material and moral for Jefferson but also for his people by staying and living in the plantation school. He teaches Jefferson that he is more important than the white people who lied to Jefferson. Wiggins said to him that he can be a hero for himself, for his family, and his community.

Gaines shows that Jefferson finally accepts his death courageously by his ability to control his personal feeling about pain and fear to face his death. He is also able to release his hatred toward his captors and accept his fate. By telling and promising Wiggins that he will do his best, shows his family and community that he is a man who has responsibility to keep the dignity and right of his community: "I'm

go'n do my best, Mr Wiggins. That's all I can promise. My best." (Gaines 224, 225). Eventually, he devotes his courage which makes him brave to face his death in the electric chair. He believes Paul, the white witness of the execution to be with him when the execution is begun. Paul describes that Jefferson is a courageous man who faces his death with no fear or danger:

He didn't seem frightened; he appeared tired.

"Paul?" Jefferson said quietly ... "You go'n be there, Paul?" Jefferson asked, Paul nodded."Yes, Jefferson. I'll be there." (Gaines 244,255).

Wiggins' powerful speeches to Jefferson gives him courage to face his death. His understanding of the meaning of love to his godmother by standing "as a man" is the important thing to his family. He finally shows to all people that Miss Emma do not rise "a hog" but a human being. Jefferson's last words "Tell Nannan I walked" is a tribute to his godmother and a testament to the profound impact Wiggins has grown on his life. Wiggins has not only enabled Jefferson to stand but also steadily walk.

4.2 Dignity

Gaines creates characters Jefferson and Grant Wiggins as the portrait of human beings who have and perceive dignity. He shows Jefferson's dignity into meanings of dying in honor and dignity, while Grant Wiggins into meanings of being a man with duty and responsibility. Although at the beginning, Wiggins hates to be a teacher, teaches, and lives his whole life in the plantation. He has inner conflicts: to marry Vivian and go away from the plantation or teaches his community and tells his girlfriend that he

has to help Jefferson by keeping his duty and responsibility to teach Jefferson and prove to the whites people that Jefferson is “ a human being” not “a hog”. Wiggins decides to dedicate himself as a teacher by teaching the Afro-American children in the plantation school thinking that he is a part of his community. By teaching the students reading, writing, and arithmetic, he raises the dignity of Afro-American people. He explains the students vividly about Jefferson’s condition to make them realize and understand the important of owning responsibility and how to live as a man respectfully and in dignity. He teaches Jefferson about moral and obligation, patience and compassion to love his godmother. He raises Jefferson’s mind by teaching him that he is more important than the white people who lie to Jefferson. He sacrifices his pride by saying that he cannot be a hero but Jefferson can, and Jefferson finally recognizes that he is a man who has dignity with moral and obligation. He shows his obligation to “take the cross” for the family and community.

Gaines uses diary as a symbol of Jefferson’s legacy: having no land, proverty, or material wealth to leave behind, the diary becomes a single testament to his life. By recording his thoughts and feelings as he awaits execution, Jefferson writes himself into history. His diary becomes the historical document that provides a personal account of his life. Through the diary, Jefferson, alone with his private thoughts is able to acknowledge his part in the tragic events surrounding Alcee Grove’s murder and to accept responsibility for his actions. He has realized that he is not only guilty of having “in the wrong place at the wrong

time” but also guilty of choosing and making the wrong choice.

Jefferson writes journal about his personal feelings, activities, and observations about everything he had experienced in the jail. He expresses intimated feeling he has not been able previously to articulate, such as his loves and cares for his nannan: ‘When they brot me in the room and i seen nannan at the teble i seen how ole she look an how tied she look and i tol her i love her and i tol her i was strong’ (Gaines 231). His promising himself and keeping his own words to “walk as a man” is a prove that he has courage to face his death. His sacrifice to end his life in the electric chair for the crime he never committed shows a valuable worth to his own as a symbol of his personal dignity. He has learned to stand and reclaimed his manhood despite of dehumanizing environment which destroys his soul.

Jefferson’s honorable and dignified death in the electric chair is also Wiggins’ success in teaching him. The death symbolizes dignity, strength, and humanity of the Afro-American community and all human beings, bravery and toughness to accept the execution without sadnesss and fear, although falsely accused.

CONCLUSION

Ernest J. Gaines in *A Lesson Before Dying* coveys that human being must have courage and dignity to maintain life although they cope with prejudice, hatred, and racism. Jefferson, the central character and Grant Wiggins, the minor character are used to portraint all people who undergo such a condition. Jefferson as a young uneducated Afro-American man who is being at the wrong place and

wrong time accused as a murderer and robbery for a crime he did not commit and sentenced to die in the electric chair. He becomes the victim of the racist whites who still disregard for Afro-Americans. Describing as less than a man and compering to a hog make Jefferson despair, terrify, infuriate, and identify himself that he is no better than a hog. His crude behaviour is a mirror of the awereness of himself as a human being who has courage and dignity.

Courage is the ability of human being to control their fear of danger, pain, and opposition. People who have courage are able to face threat, pain, danger, or even death in order to maintain and get acknowledgement of their right and dignity in life. Jefferson is a courageous young man who is able to control his fear of danger and pain to face his death, but also release his hatred toward his captors.

Dignity is revealed through Grant Wiggins' responsibility to teach Jefferson and people about love, moral, obligation, the importance of having duty and responsibility. Jefferson's death in the electric chair as " a human being" is a symbol of human's courage to maintain dignity. With this, emphasizes that there is no limitation for human beings to live with the same right and dignity since they are created equal and *A Lesson Before Dying* is a literary work which offers one of the most important thing in human's life, courage and dignity to live as human beings who are worthy and respected.

REFERENCES

- Abram, M.H. 1967. *The Mirror and The Lamp*. New York: Oxord University Press.
- Aubert, Alvin. 1966. *Contemporary Novelist : Ernest J. Gaines*. London: St. James Press.
- Daveau, Anne. 2003. *The Chelsea Forum. Ernest J. Gaines*. Chelsea: The Chelsea Forum Inc.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo.1841.*Essay VIII Heroism (www.google.com)*.
- Gaines, J. Ernest.1993, *A Lesson Before Dying*. Unites States: Knopf Publishing Group.
- Gaudet, Marcia.1999. *Gainess Narrative Style: Narrative style and storytelling Techneque*. Lousiana: Lousiana Division of Art.
- Jhonson, William H. 1993. *USA Today Award : Harlem Rainaissance (www.google.com) 2000*.
- Ringle, Kent.1993. *The Washington Post. A Southern Road to Freedom*. Lousiana (www.google.com).
- Payton, Christina. 2004. Publict Relation and Service. Gaines Nominated for nobel Prize. Lafayette: Lousiana (www.google.com).
- Sacramento, Willy. 2000. *The Summary of A Lesson before ig (www.google.com)*.
- Wriston, Henry. 1960. *Human's ...ty, Right and Principles.* (www.google.com) 1960.