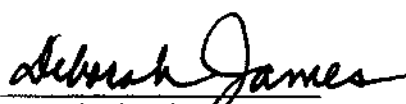


**Searching for Humanity Through the Eyes of Ernest Gaines:
Nonverbal Communication in *A Lesson Before Dying***

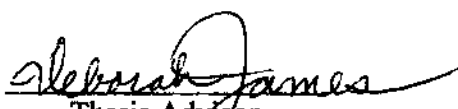
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He put on his hat, and I noticed his eyes. He knew why Henri Pichot wanted me up there, all right. But Henri Pichot had not thought it was necessary to tell him. At his age, he was still only a messenger to run errands. To learn anything, he had to attain it by stealth or through an innate sense of things around him. He nodded to me, knowing that I knew he knew why Henri Pichot wanted to see me, and he walked away, head down. (Gaines 41)

This quote from *A Lesson Before Dying*, published in 1993, exemplifies a pattern of nonverbal communication permeating the entire text. Ernest J. Gaines uses silent cues, particularly those related to characters' eyes, on almost every page, prodding readers to ruminate on the deeper meaning of his narrator's unspoken observations. As a supplement to traditional dialogue, this creative technique enhances the story and encourages serious reflection on the part of the reader.

In deceptively simple language, Gaines writes a profound and commercially-viable tale for which he received the 1994 National Book Critics Circle Award. David E. Vancil summarizes Gaines's artistic achievement in a review of *A Lesson Before Dying* that same year:

There is nothing phony or forced in this book. Besides carrying an aura of authenticity, the novel is simple to read and understand, but unlike a parable, which it might be said to parallel in its intent, there is no simple moral. The nature of morality in its social and individual aspects is itself explored. (491)

Ernest Gaines is widely regarded as a master of natural spoken dialogue and lauded as a modern-day griot of the African American oral tradition. Yet his true brilliance lies in crafting the silent communication so prevalent in his fiction. The most powerful voice of Gaines is often mute. By looking beyond the obvious, deliberating on the unspoken, and applying knowledge and personal experience to *A Lesson Before Dying*, the process of discovering answers to the complex problems associated with relationships, reconciliation, and redemption can begin.

In 1999, *A Lesson Before Dying* was adapted for television as were two of Gaines's previous novels, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Gathering of Old Men*. His novels have been translated into several foreign languages, and he has received a plethora of other literary awards and accolades. An additional accomplishment, though, is his ability to simultaneously lay bare a multitude of timeless and universal issues, epitomizing the hallmarks of a classic novel and assuring its place in the literary canon. The reader, guided by signals provided outside the dialogue, must read between the printed lines on the page to determine the novel's deepest meaning.

Close analysis of the silent interaction between characters promotes an understanding of the author's themes. While the vernacular Gaines's characters use is simple, the ideas he presents in his work are not. Like Farrell Jarreau, the messenger described in the introductory quotation, the reader must apply stealth and an innate sense of things around her to penetrate the essence of humanity. However, a word of caution from Robert Hemenway, University of Kansas chancellor and literary critic, is warranted. In "Are You a Flying Lark or a Setting Dove?" he cautions:

some white critics, arrogantly believing that reading black literature is synonymous with understanding it, have been transfixed by a need to make their criticism a social statement. More than happy to think of black people as social categories, not as individual human beings, these critics cannot separate Afro-American writing from their own pathological fantasies of what it must mean to be black. (122-23)

A Lesson Before Dying is about more than the challenges associated with being black in a Eurocentric society. Gaines positions the story within the context of the African American experience, but its central theme investigates what it means to be human. Analysis of the frequent

nonverbal communication that occurs between characters supplies the reader with the tools to define the characters not solely as African Americans, rather, as individual human beings with their concomitant idiosyncrasies.

The novel, like all of Gaines's fiction, is set in rural southern Louisiana. Ostensibly, it is the story of two young African Americans: Jefferson, an unsophisticated man sentenced to be executed for a murder he did not commit and Grant, the novel's narrator, a college-educated teacher at the rustic plantation school. In a 2005 personal reflection of his fifty-year writing career, *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, Gaines reports:

I didn't want just another story of someone waiting to be executed. To make my story different I had to do something else, and make Grant also a prisoner of his environment. Grant hates teaching. He hates the South. He hates everything around him. This is the forties, remember, and the professions for blacks to enter were extremely limited. (57)

The lives of Jefferson and Grant become inextricably linked by two elderly women of the quarter. Grant introduces them, and hints at his modest hierarchical position within their relationship. In the opening lines of the first chapter he says, "either I sat behind my aunt and his godmother or I sat beside them" (Gaines 3). This is a preliminary clue as to where the narrator views himself in his relationship with the women. He describes them as "large women" analogous to "a great stone or as one of our oak or cypress stumps" (Gaines 3). The imagery projects a sense of immovability, of permanence. The import of this physical depiction is explained by Trudier Harris, in her 2001 analysis, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*: "Large size in black communities frequently brought with it an authority of sorts . . .

few skinny women in African American communities are perceived as capable of directing the lives of others" (9). And direct, they do.

Grant instinctively knows the outcome of the trial. There is little doubt as to the verdict of a black man accused of killing a white man in the segregated south of 1948. Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma, also understands the inevitability of the proceedings. She remains silent and immobile throughout, but is singularly affected by the white defense attorney's comparison of Jefferson to a hog. His misguided logic concludes that because of Jefferson's supposed subhuman characteristics, he is incapable of comprehending the gravity of his alleged actions. Therefore, the defendant cannot reasonably be held accountable. The attorney adds further insult by including a phrenological allusion as he addresses the jurors:

I implore, look carefully – do you see a man sitting here? Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand – look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan – can plan – can plan anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa – yes, yes, that he can do – but to plan? (Gaines 7)

The text is replete with references to eyes. In this example, the attorney is begging the jurors to read the eyes of the accused. The reader must also examine the eyes to ascertain the intended message.

Jeffrey J. Folks addresses the cultural impact of the attorney's statement in his 1993 article entitled, "Communal Responsibility in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*." He explains, "[Gaines's] use of language is grounded in a historical community in which the layers of implied

meaning are clearly understood" (262). While the lawyer's intent to mitigate Jefferson's punishment may be noble, he effectively strips him of his humanity. Miss Emma adeptly penetrates the layers, senses the negativity, and is pained by the connotation.

After Jefferson's conviction and sentencing, Miss Emma and Tante Lou set a course to rectify this degradation. Jefferson's godmother succinctly states, "I don't want them to kill no hog . . . I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet" (Gaines 13). Grant is unknowingly positioned at the epicenter of their ambition. The women approach him with their strategy:

Now both she and my aunt looked at me as though I was supposed to figure out the rest of it. We stared at one another a few seconds before what they expected began to dawn on me . . . but I could tell by her face and my aunt's face that they were not about to give up on what they had in mind. (Gaines 13)

Curiously, the stalwart women have communicated their plan without speaking. Grant slowly begins to comprehend their intention. The perceptive reader also understands that they are commissioning him to visit Jefferson at the jail in Bayonne and to transform him from a hog to a man, a dignified human being, before his death. Grant initially resists their coercion, but is unable or unwilling to strenuously object. His aunt, Tante Lou, maintains a large measure of influence over him. Their lifelong relationship, the cultural pressure of deferring to one's elders, and Grant's implicit debt to her for sacrificing of herself to finance his education render him impotent to refuse. Harris adds another component to his compliance. She contends that "Grant is really a man without a cause, one who finds it ultimately easier to do as he is told than to exert the rebellious and potentially dangerous energy necessary to change his circumstances" (124). As such, the frustrated Grant becomes a begrudging accessory to the machinations of Miss Emma

and Tante Lou. Implementation of their plan, however, requires the cooperation of Henri Pichot, the owner of the plantation on which they live. Pichot is the brother-in-law of Sheriff Guidry, the authority responsible for Jefferson's incarceration. Customarily, only relatives and clergy are allowed to visit prisoners. The women seek Pichot's influence with the sheriff for an exception.

Their meeting with Pichot takes place in the novel's short third chapter. Grant drives the women to the house, they meet with Pichot, and subsequently return to the quarters in the span of less than eight full pages. In this brief space, filled with an abundance of action and little dialogue, issues of hierarchy and race are raised. In her aptly titled 1991 book, *Ernest Gaines*, Valerie Babb addresses the issue of brevity in the author's fiction. She asserts:

the leanness of his narrators' accounts descends from his recollection of storytellers who needed to provide little elaboration because they shared a community of meaning with their listeners. In his world and the world of his novel, histories are told and retold from person to person, from generation to generation. Within this oral continuum a silent second text gives unspoken meaning to a stated meaning. (11)

The majority of communication is conducted through nonverbal interaction. The ensuing scene is filled with unspoken dialogue.

Annoyed with being relegated to the role of chauffeur, a duty he perceives as beneath him, Grant slams the car door after Tante Lou and Miss Emma are seated. This insolent act has quiet consequences. Grant writes, "I could feel my aunt's eyes on the back of my neck" (Gaines 16-17). He restates the same phrase when his sarcastic remark is ignored, and yet again when he willfully drives over ruts, causing discomfort for the women. "I could hear them bouncing on the back seat, but they never said a word" (Gaines 17). Harris translates the action within the context

of African American culture. She says “their silence also indicates that, in the hierarchy of control within black family structures, they do not need to give Grant any further attention. After all, he is not their age peer, so why should they waste casual words upon him?” (Gaines 127). The silence, accompanied by Tante Lou’s glare, speaks for itself. Grant, in his narration, does not detail his feelings about the silence, but it is obvious that he cares deeply about what the women think of him. He continues to act immaturely in an effort to passively resist the authority of his elders. In her comprehensive 2002 analysis, *Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*, Mary Ellen Doyle observes that Gaines frequently foregoes extensive dialogue: “Long, deadly silences alternate with clipped comments and answers and a very few passionate speeches by Grant, all in patterns of resistance, deception, manipulation, and capitulation” (209). Speech is kept to a minimum, while silence is typically used to illustrate the variety of emotions that pass between characters.

The novel is imbued with overtones of the subjection caused by the racial mores prevalent in the time and place in which *A Lesson Before Dying* is situated. Nonverbal communication accentuates the tension. Upon arrival at Pichot’s home, through the back gate and through the back door, the trio is kept waiting in the kitchen for an interminable period of time. Several knowing glances pass between the maid who has notified Pichot of their presence and the visitors. Both Tante Lou and Miss Emma had been household employees of the Pichot family for many decades. Grant, too, performed a variety of tasks for them during his childhood. The condescension they are subjected to by Pichot and his white guest is palpable through the narrator’s implementation of optical and other physical representations. Borman and Borman, in their 1995 study, *Speech Communication: A Basic Approach*, state that “nonverbal cues often

reveal if one participant is of higher status, has fate control over others, or is in a 'one-up' relationship" (59). Pichot controls significant aspects of their fate, including the immediate concern of whether or not Grant will be allowed to visit Jefferson. When Pichot finally appears, he asserts an air of elevated status through both his words and gestures. Despite their longstanding relationship, the elderly African American visitors are never offered a seat, and Miss Emma's request is met with a dismissive attitude. Pichot then addresses Grant directly, accusing him of manipulating Miss Emma into making the request: "Henri Pichot looked at me again. He was sure I had put her up to this. I shifted my eyes, and I didn't look in his direction until I heard him speaking to her" (Gaines 22). Pichot simultaneously minimizes Miss Emma, suggesting she is incapable of independent thought, and challenges Grant. After an abbreviated exchange, Grant narrates, "He was finished talking to me. Now he wanted me to look away. I lowered my eyes. When I raised my head, I saw his eyes on her again" (Gaines 21). Gaines establishes a vivid sense of the prejudicial interaction through four succinct sentences and his subtle vocabulary of eyes. Zora Neal Hurston, in her Harlem Renaissance-era article, "What White Publishers Won't Print," elaborates that "a college-bred Negro is still not a person like other folks, but an interesting problem, more or less" (54). Where, exactly, he fits is a conundrum Grant wrestles with throughout the story. Despite his education, he is viewed by Pichot and others as 'less than' which is enunciated through nonverbal signals. Later in the novel, Grant reasserts Hurston's point of view when he states, "Guidry drank from his cup and looked over the rim at me. He did not like me; I was one of the smart ones" (Gaines 156). The white men in authority are fully cognizant of Grant's acumen, but treat him as inferior, as a means of assuaging their own

intellectual inadequacies. Grant internally bristles at their behavior. The looks of contempt and disparaging gestures conclusively emit the intended message.

Grant plays the role of an inferior while dealing with Pichot and his ilk, but his performance should not be interpreted as his true opinion of himself. In fact, because of his advanced education, he feels superior to Pichot. He has no choice but to feign obsequiousness, according to the societal mandates. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses acts of subservience such as that displayed by Grant in his 1979 article, "Dis and Dat' Dialect and the Descent." He explains that "if to communicate is an essential and social function of all language, so is to conceal, to leave unspoken, to mask. Languages conceal and internalize more, perhaps, than they convey outwardly" (92). Indeed, the unspoken message in the scene is transmitted to the alert reader: "He stared at me, and I realized that I had not answered him in the proper manner. 'Sir,' I added" (Gaines 21). Grant masks his authentic self as a means of placating Pichot, in keeping with southern standards of discourse between races. He participates in the charade to serve his immediate personal goal of facilitating a rapid exit from the plantation's big house, but at the expense of his dignity. Although this is a dramatic, racially charged scene, Gaines does not resort to predictability by fashioning a story in which all whites are bad and all blacks are good or vice versa. Instead, the author provides a measured realism where the demarcation between good and bad, right and wrong, are obscure. Unvoiced communication helps to articulate these subtleties.

Doyle points out that "in some credible measure, white society must be incorporated into wholesome community" (207). Gaines recruits the deputy, Paul, as a manifestation of the goodness existing within white society. Upon first meeting him, Grant notes that Paul is "nearer my age, and he seemed better educated than the chief deputy or the sheriff" (Gaines 125). The

reader is immediately alerted to Paul's difference from the others. On four separate occasions he is referred to as coming from good stock. The final statement takes place near the end of the novel and is combined with a visual exchange: "Paul continued to look at me. He did not like the way I had used the name of God. He came from good stock. He believed. But he didn't say anything" (Gaines 256). The phrase evokes images of slavery when people were treated as chattel, displayed on a block for inspection and sale. Undoubtedly, this is a very purposeful act on the part of the author to include Paul in the African American history. The repetition provides the reader with an indication of its importance.

Philip Auger, in his 1995 *Southern Literary Journal* article, "A Lesson About Manhood: Appropriating 'The Word' in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*," offers that, "although Paul is acknowledged from the beginning as being 'from good stock,' he is also a representative of white patriarchal law" (85). Like Grant, Paul is forced to carefully maneuver within the confines of segregation, yet signal his difference from the Henri Pichots and Sheriff Guidrys of their shared world. The interactions between Paul and Grant are laced with nonverbal communication. For example, "I looked at Paul. He nodded and smiled. He probably would have said something encouraging if the sheriff had not been there" (Gaines 177). Because they live in a time and place of segregated racial doctrine, Paul is unable to completely unveil his genuine humanity in front of those who would disapprove; nonetheless, Grant understands. Herman Beavers, in his 1995 analysis, *Wrestling Angels into Song: The Fictions of Ernest J. Gaines and James Alan McPherson*, comments that Gaines's "characters work largely in a space that does not offer protection of a contractual sort, though it is nonetheless governed by very strict codes of behavior that determine the quality of interactions between black and white" (6). Through small, but

significant acts, Paul begins to change that tenet. Grant and Paul do not, in fact, share a common history, but begin to dislodge the sordid traditions of the South and discover their contemporary commonality of manhood, ergo humanity. An interaction between Grant and a chief deputy serves to highlight a sharp contrast to those between Grant and Paul. It, too, is depicted by words unspoken. Grant narrates, “[he] could see that I didn’t like him, and I could tell he didn’t like me. But he knew who was in charge and that I would have to take anything he dished out” (Gaines 70). The prevailing rules require that irrespective of age or education, the hierarchy of skin color remains the key factor in determining who holds authority. Because congenial interaction between races is taboo, most of the conversation between Grant and Paul transpires through a secretive language of the eyes.

Ed Piacentino, in his 2004 article, “‘The Common Humanity that is in Us All’: Toward Racial Reconciliation in Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*,” expounds on the unlikely prospect of racial harmony. He states that “of all the white characters, Paul is the only one to reject the myth of racism” (74). While absolute reconciliation is an impossibility in their current environment, Paul’s behavior toward Grant and the other African American characters is in vivid contrast to that of the other law enforcement officials presented in the story. Grant recounts, “[The chief deputy] looked at me as if to remind me that I was supposed to say Mister before a white man’s name. He stood there eyeing me until he felt that I understood” (Gaines 188). The demeaning behavior exhibited by the racist authority is juxtaposed against the kindness of Paul. The striking commonality, though, is that the conversations are largely nonverbal.

On his first visit to Jefferson after the execution date is announced, Grant discloses:

When I came into the office, Paul looked me straight in the face. He knew it was

unnecessary to search me and the food, but he knew he had to do it. He also knew that he should not even think about not doing it. It was as much his duty as wearing the uniform and carrying the cell keys. But you could see in his eyes that he was wondering why. Even when he was searching me and not looking in my face, I could tell by the light touches on my pockets that he didn't want to do it. And with the food it was the same. The chief deputy sat behind the desk, watching everything. To him, this was how things were supposed to be and how they would be. (Gaines 168)

During visits to the jail, Grant and Paul walk beside one another when they are alone, rather than Grant trailing behind the white man as was routine during that period. This seemingly trivial act foreshadows an eventual reconciliation of sorts, not only between the two men, but symbolically between blacks and whites. A soundless defining moment occurs between Grant and Paul when, at the end of the first visit with Jefferson, Miss Emma is mortified by her godson's taciturn behavior. She calls upon her Lord for help. In reaction to this outburst, the otherwise detached Grant relates that "the deputy and I exchanged glances. With his eyes and a nod, he told me to put my arms around her. Which I did" (Gaines 74). Absent the nonverbal cue from Paul, it is unlikely that Grant would have comforted her. Piacentino notes that "Paul's eyes serve as the window to the essential goodness of his character" (78). It is impossible to imagine any of the other white characters with the capacity to prompt Grant into exhibiting the same goodness Paul possesses but is unable to act upon. In another place and time, it is likely that Paul would put his own arms around Miss Emma as a source of comfort. Paul and Grant begin to develop a relationship between equals, a literary hallmark in the fiction of Ernest Gaines. Suzanne Jones, in her 1997 article, "New Narrative of Southern Manhood: Race, Masculinity, and Closure in Ernest

Gaines's Fiction" explains that the author "is interested not only in deconstructing stereotypes but also in presenting new models of southern manhood, for both black and white men" (15). Paul is an agent of change for Grant. Despite his initial reticence, the teacher begins to understand through Paul's actions that masculinity is not only defined in terms of toughness and masking, but also through the open expression of emotion. Grant's transformation has begun.

Jefferson, however, is another story. Although introduced through narrative flashback at the scene of the crime and at his trial, Jefferson does not participate in the ongoing action until nearly one third of the way through the novel. When he finally makes an appearance, the interaction is saturated with nonverbal communication. During a visit at which Grant is also present, Miss Emma and Tante Lou coax Jefferson with food and conversation in an attempt to breach the impenetrable psychological barrier he has erected, but are rebuked with silence. Gaines, as expected, uses repetition to highlight the increasing tension: "He didn't look at us once . . . He didn't answer, and kept his eyes on the ceiling . . . He still didn't answer . . . He looked up at the ceiling, not seeing it" (Gaines 71-3). Jefferson's aloofness provides the reader with an acute sense of the dour atmosphere in the jail cell. After a brief verbal exchange, the narrator further documents Jefferson's recalcitrant behavior:

He turned toward her. His body didn't turn, just his head turned a little. His eyes did most of the turning. He looked at her as though he did not know who she was, or what she was doing there. Then he looked at me. You know what I'm talking about, don't you? his eyes said. They were big brown eyes, the whites too reddish. You know, don't you? his eyes said again. I looked back at him. My eyes would not dare answer him. But his eyes knew that my eyes knew. (Gaines 73).

Clearly, Jefferson is not an ignorant man. Despite the aspersions of his attorney at the trial, it is apparent to the astute reader that Jefferson is an intelligent person, as evidenced in this passage by his ability to both transmit and receive complex nonverbal messages. He is talking to Grant about the execution. Jefferson plays a nonverbal game of chicken with Grant, forcing the teacher to confront the liminal state of his own existence. Under slightly different circumstances, Grant could be in the same position as Jefferson. His education and sophistication do not exempt him from the harsh, racist realities of the society in which he exists. Gaines masterfully connects Grant's potential in life with that of the ill-fated prisoner. In one jarring moment, Grant is coerced by Jefferson's eyes to evaluate his own life.

The jailhouse visits prove too difficult for the women, and Grant subsequently visits Jefferson alone. For the most part, Jefferson remains speechless. Actions reveal the intrinsic beliefs the prisoner maintains: "After a while he raised his head, but he didn't look at me; he looked at the barred window" (Gaines 82). This concise sentence contrasts freedom and confinement through imagery. Jefferson is unwilling to look at Grant, a representation of freedom. Instead, his gaze is leveled at the barred window, a symbol of his imprisonment. In a pivotal exchange, it becomes apparent to the reader that Jefferson internalizes the animalistic characterization by which he was defined in the courtroom. Grant says, "He kept his eyes on me as he got up from the bunk . . . 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). Grant's reaction is one of dismay, combined with self-centered concern for how he might later respond to Miss Emma's inquiries regarding Jefferson's welfare. He queries Jefferson about the intent of the brutish display and whether the prisoner wishes for him to continue the visits. Grant receives no response. Instead, "his

expression didn't change – as though someone had chiseled that painful, cynical grin on his face” (Gaines 84). Jefferson persists in communicating through silence until he gains confidence in the teacher's legitimate goodwill.

A gradual, but discernable transformation begins to take place in the relationship between the two men. Beavers describes the subtle change: “Rather than dramatizing a violent explosion embodying radical change, Gaines's fiction depicts a slower reaction, one that is no less disruptive” (32). Jefferson makes incremental eye contact with the teacher. Grant chronicles the evolution: “He raised his head slowly and studied me awhile” (Gaines 138); “He looked at me, knowing that I knew what he was thinking about” (Gaines 139); “He looked at me awhile, then he returned to the window again” (Gaines 170); “I didn't know anything else to talk about, and he had nothing to say, so we just sat there quietly awhile” (185). A level of comfort has been established, where the communication is no longer accusatory or belligerent. Like friends, they are at ease in one another's company. Doyle describes the bond that begins to develop. She says, “manhood is really strong and sensitive humanity, which includes perceptive and reactive comprehension of others' acts and feelings, and the moral and relational values that enable one to learn and love, make commitments, and survive as an integral personality, wherever one is, regardless of circumstances” (207). The men are able to identify with one another. They discuss the definition of heroism, the myth of white superiority, religion and the possibility of an afterlife. They smile at one another and talk about music. Grant challenges Jefferson to stand in defiance of the white patriarchal rules. Grant has, at last, made a commitment to Jefferson, and they are no longer apprehensive about the occasional silence that passes between them.

The most compelling act of nonverbal communication is performed by Jefferson in the form of a diary. Grant encourages him to put his feelings in writing so they can later discuss his observations. In halting prose, without regard to capitalization or punctuation, Jefferson begins to compose his diary. John Dufresne, in his 2003 guide to fiction writing, *A Lie That Tells the Truth*, cautions against the overuse of “eye dialect” which can be distracting to the reader (200). Gaines, however, uses the literary technique in moderation, expertly crafting seven pages of Jefferson’s epistolary effort. The reader must cogitate over its words and meaning, but is able to comprehend the difficulty Jefferson experiences with the physical act of writing, while able to simultaneously appreciate the awareness with which he writes. His first entry states, “*If I ain’t nothing but a hog, how come they just don’t knock me in the head like a hog? . . . Man walk on two foots; hogs on four hoofs*” (Gaines 220). Through the diary, Jefferson is able to articulate his authentic self, express love toward others, appreciate natural beauty, and most significantly, determine to meet his death courageously. He concludes that he is, indeed, a member of humanity. His godmother’s primary wish has come to fruition through Jefferson’s nonverbal exercise.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his 1979 book, *The Signifying Monkey*, expands on the exigency of Jefferson’s composition from a historical perspective. He notes that “what was at stake for the earliest black authors was nothing less than the implicit testimony to their humanity, a common humanity which they sought to demonstrate through the very writing of a text” (171). The nonverbal testimony that he is “youman” negates his former belief that he is a lowly farm animal. In *Mozart and Leadbelly*, Gaines adds that “the story is not whether Jefferson is innocent or guilty but how he feels about himself at the end” (60). The collaboration between Grant and

Jefferson allows an unbreakable bond to be established. Grant becomes the teacher he has been trained to be, and the man he should be, by providing Jefferson with the vehicle through which to examine himself. Donald M. Murray, in "Getting Under the Lightning," expounds on the impact of self-expression through writing. He states, "If you don't have to talk to yourself, if you have no need to teach yourself by writing, then writing may not be essential to you" (217). For Jefferson to fully understand himself, writing is essential. Through his nonverbal expression, he ultimately defines his humanity.

Further, the diary represents Jefferson's legacy for future generations. Educator Josephine Koster Tarvers, in her 1997 manual, *Teaching in Progress: Theories, Practices and Scenarios* says, "If students can understand the constraints of their communities and master them, they can come to control and change the community through their own discourse" (22). Through a silent, solitary act, Jefferson comes to terms with both his life and death, teaching an eloquent lesson to the entire community. In the introduction to *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, Winston Napier notes:

Writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and George S. Schuyler produced essays that addressed issues of ideal literary themes, cultural identity, and psychological reconstruction. Their writings provided the black community lessons in identity and intellectual responsibility . . ." (2).

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines provides Jefferson's diary as a nonverbal extension of Napier's literary observation. Like the slave narratives that preceded it, the diary allows Jefferson to "literally [write himself] into being through carefully crafted representations in language of the

black self" (Gates 131). He provides his African American community with a document to supplement their oral history. Writing is a formative act for the young man.

Grant assists Jefferson in the discovery of his humanity. He enables the student to find his genuine voice through a notebook and pencil. Jefferson writes, "an reson I cry cause you been so good to me mr wigin an nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im sombody" (Gaines 232). Grant, too, learns from Jefferson. In the introduction to his critical analysis of Gaines's fiction, Beavers states that "the African American presence is one that calls attention to and references the process of conceptualizing who Americans are and how they engage in a process of knowing" (vii). Throughout the story, and particularly through the diary, the process of knowing is largely constructed through nonverbal communication. The acts of reading and writing allow Grant and Jefferson to fully engage in a meaningful friendship, which, in turn, enables them to know themselves and the world in which they live. Grant narrates the culmination of the process: "My head down, I didn't answer him. 'You can look at me, Mr. Wiggins, I don't mind.' I raised my head, and I saw him standing there under the window, big and tall, and not stooped as he had been in chains" (Gaines 224-5). Jefferson is no longer a prisoner. The diary enables him to loose his bonds. He is now firmly in control of himself, his environment, and his interaction. Folks discusses the ability of Gaines to both recognize the roots of the African American culture and envision a "progressive future" (259). Grant, through Jefferson, has progressed from a contemptuous, hopeless person to one who ultimately achieves humanity; Jefferson, through Grant, has progressed from ignorance to enlightenment. The men are able to look one another straight in the eyes.

A poignant example of shared humanity transpires at the end of the novel, following Jefferson's execution. In his diary, he states, "good by mr wigin tell them im strong tell them im a man good by mr wigin im gon ax paul if he can bring you this" (Gaines 234). Paul arrives at Grant's school in the plantation quarter to notify him that the macabre event has taken place and to deliver Jefferson's diary as requested. Grant says:

Paul looked directly at me, his gray-blue eyes more intense than I had ever seen them before. I took the notebook from him, and he continued to stare at me, like someone in shock . . . [He was] staring at me and speaking louder than was necessary. He was looking at me but seeing Jefferson in that chair. (Gaines 253-4)

Superficially, Paul's increased volume might indicate anxiety caused by his presence in unfamiliar territory. More likely, Paul perceives this to be his opportunity to stand as a witness to Jefferson's humanity and heroism. He is the only white character to reject racism and finally finds the courage to speak out, loudly. Doyle further analyzes the discourse. She says, "[Paul] has informed Grant of what other whites did not tell him; in doing so Paul has enacted the role of a black servant, the one who overhears whites in power and passes the word to the community" (225). The narration continues, "Paul stopped talking. He was breathing heavily. He was looking at me but seeing Jefferson in that chair" (Gaines 254). The repetition of the eye contact that passes between the two magnifies its importance, and the repetition of the mode of death starkly reminds the reader of the brutality of state sanctioned murder.

Grant describes the conclusion of their meeting when Paul says, "'Allow me to be your friend, Grant Wiggins. I don't ever want to forget this day. I don't ever want to forget him.' I took his hand. He held mine with both of his" (Gaines 255). The act of notification has moved Paul closer

to Grant, man-to-man, but also to the plantation's entire African American community, articulating what he could not previously express in the presence of white people. Beavers summarizes, "Community is realized in Gaines's work through his characters' collective struggle to discover new ways to bring human energies to bear on a region where past sins linger and people continue to rely on outmoded social conventions" (132). Jefferson is the catalyst for hope that the possibility of new ways actually exist. Through their relationship with Jefferson, Grant and Paul now share at least part of a common history. Paul's communion with Grant is signified nonverbally, by the intimate human touch of a handshake.

Grant achieves his humanity in the end when he, like Jefferson, is able to express authentic emotion without anger, shame, or fear of reprisal: "I turned from him and went into the church. Irene Cole told the class to rise, with their shoulders back. I went up to the desk and turned to face them. I was crying" (Gaines 256). Societal change has become a possibility because the characters – Grant, Jefferson, Paul, Miss Emma, and Tante Lou – assert their agency.

Ernest Gaines achieves a desire articulated by Ralph Ellison in 1953, four decades before *A Lesson Before Dying* was published. In "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," Ellison says:

I was to dream of a prose which was flexible, and swift as American change is swift, confronting the inequalities and brutalities of our society forthrightly, but yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity and individual self-realization. We are fortunate as American writers in that with our variety of racial and national traditions, idioms and manners, we are yet one.

On its profoundest level American experience is of a whole. (67-8).

Gaines captures the communal experience of which Ellison speaks by seamlessly executing the nonverbal communication in his novel. He is able to achieve a balance between remembering the past and working toward an improved future. The unmistakable evolution of the relationships between the men and women in the novel suffice as evidence. *A Lesson Before Dying* is an education in life. Through the eyes of the characters created by Gaines, the reader is able to decode the tacit interactions, surmise their deeper meaning, and ultimately find humanity. Doyle adds, “the chief indicator of progress is the voices of characters who move from silence or blaming or dishonest evasions to something like real communication. And the power to speak follows on the willingness to look directly at another human and to ‘read’ what is in the face and eyes” (213). Gaines never preaches or overtly moralizes. The author respects his characters and his audience, anticipating their innate ability to translate the nonverbal signals. He paints a skillful portrait, then stands aside, allowing the reader to interpret the messages and quantify their value. Through his characters’ silent communication, the author illustrates the complexity of humanity. The reader must look directly into the eyes of Ernest J. Gaines.

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