

From Accusation to Prison and Death: A Study of Ernest James Gaines's A Lesson Before Dying

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Abstract: *Through this exploration, one discovers that the issue of racial conflicts between Blacks and Whites in the United States is still evident in Ernest James Gaines's A Lesson Before Dying. For, the author's portrayal of black characters in general as victims of rejection and of Jefferson in particular as victim of accusation because of his blackness in this great nation, recalls the racist atmosphere that prevailed in American society during the colonial era. His account for this black male character who is killed mercilessly by his white peers for an uncommitted crime, appears as a way for him to inform the reader about the plight of all black Americans in this "so-called democratic nation" which rejects its own citizens on behalf of racial belonging. This act of murder endured by this black character attests of the white man's eagerness to create an America deprived of black citizens.*

Keywords: *Whites, Blacks, Accusation, Jailing, Killing.*

Introduction

This paper deals mainly with the protagonist's accusation, prison and killing by his white counterparts because of his blackness in the United States in Ernest James Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. Published in 1993, this novel tells of Jefferson, a black male character who is jailed and assassinated after being accused of murder in Louisiana for being present at the place of murder. My choice of Ernest James Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* for this exploration is linked not only to Blacks' experience of racism in the white man's world, but more to the main character's experience of accusation which results in his precocious death. Harper Lee who first explored it, states that "*in courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's word, the white always wins. They're ugly, but these are the facts of life*".¹ This quotation shows that what is portrayed in Gaines's narrative is black characters' experience of their white counterparts' injustice against them because of the color of their skin. In almost the same way, Romulus

Linney argues that “to instruct students to stand up to segregation, racism and hatred, teachers can instill their students with the dignity others have robbed from them”.² From this view, one understands that *A Lesson Before Dying* is also about Blacks’ search for identity which is on the way to vanish because of their white peers’ racist attitude towards them. This sorrowful experience of Blacks on the American soil urges me to concentrate on the answer to the following question: To what extent is *A Lesson Before Dying* a tragic novel? I hypothesize that Gaines’s portrayal of the protagonist’s assassination evidences the presence of tragedy in his literary text.

Being conscious of the fact that the novel examined contains a mixture of fictional and historical facts, I find it necessary to resort to the historical, the sociological, and the psychological approaches to conduct the above hypothesis. The historical approach helps me examine some points of history incorporated by the novelist into his work of fiction, as suggested by Greenblatt and Gallagher in these terms: “*New historicism acknowledges that any criticism of a work is necessarily tinged with the critic’s beliefs, social structure, and so on*” (Greenblatt and Gallagher: 2015, 119). This quotation, as it can be seen, leads me to be concerned with showing not only the presence of history in *A Lesson Before Dying*, but more with how fiction is inhabited by black Americans’ experience of racism in the United States from the slavery era to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

The sociological approach enables me to study the relationship between white and black characters in the community in which they live, for according to Krutch, “*art is not created in a vacuum; it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community*” (Krutch, quoted by Wilbur: 1962, 123). This quotation shows that the writer, whoever he may be, is often inspired by his society. Such is the case of Gaines who, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, portrays the experience of Blacks in the United States through fictitious characters. This is to say that the sociological approach helps me examine the way Gaines recreates the community he belongs to within his work of fiction, as Toni Morrison states: “*If anything I do, in the way of writing novels or whatever I write is not about the village or the community or about you (the African Americans), then it is not about anything*” (Morrison: 1984, 339). For Toni Morrison, the writer of a given literary text reconstructs the experience of people with reference to their society.

The psychological approach which is the application of Freudian theories to all the literary process from the mind of the writer and the motives of the characters to the reaction of the reader, helps me analyze the psychological pains that black characters undergo when one of them is accused, jailed and killed by their white peers: “*The criticism that employs this approach assumes that an important part of the relationship between an artist and art is similar to that between patient and dream. (...) Psychology can be used to explain fictitious characters*” (Krutch, quoted by Wilbur: 1962, 71-72). Through this quotation, one understands that my main aim in using the psychological approach is to examine black characters’ pains from their victimization by their white counterparts who reject their conception of racial mixing in the United States.

Three main points are discussed in this paper. The first is Jefferson’s accusation of murder. The second refers to his episode of life in prison. The last is linked to his killing by white Americans.

1. Jefferson’s accusation

The term “accusation” is defined as the fact of thinking and saying openly that a person is guilty of doing something wrong, especially of committing a crime. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the author’s endeavors to depict Blacks as victims of this inhuman act are evident in the passage in which he shows how Jefferson, a black male character is accused of being responsible for the death of Gropé for being present at the moment and place of murder. He is betrayed by his own lawyer who, instead of defending his client, finds pleasure in insulting him, as a way to mean that he is guilty of the charges brought against him:

Gentlemen of the jury, look at him-look at him-look at this. Do you see a man sitting here? (...) I ask you, I implore, look carefully (...) 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 anything? (...) What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn (*ALBD*, p. 9).

Through this passage, one sees how Jefferson is ironically betrayed by his own white lawyer at the American Court. When this lawyer, for example, asks the court members to look at Jefferson, he means that he is responsible for the murder of Mr. Gropé. For him, he is guilty for being present at the place of this white man’s killing. It is exactly for this particular reason that

the judges tell him that he is found guilty of the charges brought against him, and that they see no reason that he should not pay for the part he has played in his horrible crime.

Jefferson's accusation and betrayal by his own lawyer are viewed as the consequence of racial conflicts that prevail in the United States. These racial conflicts make it impossible for a black man to win the trial before Whites in this nation known as a land of democracy and justice, but ends up applying injustice because of its hatred for the black race. What is true is that Jefferson's rights as an American citizen are not respected in the United States, for the way he is judged and sentenced to death for a crime he has not committed is pitiful and incredible. His arrest by white American police officers recalls that of Eric Garner, who in Matt Taibbi's *I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street*, finds himself persecuted by the New-York Police pretending to have caught him with drug. One of his arrests, he argues, while writing a letter to his mother from a jail cell in Riskers Island, took place in 2007 in New York City:

On September 1, 2007, at 7: 30 p.m. on the corner of Castalton Ave, Heberton stopped me for reasons of their own. I was ordered to my hands on the back SUV in which they were riding in. I complied with no problem. Officer William Owens then patted me down by ways of going through my pockets and socks and not finding anything illegal on my person. ³

From this passage, one sees that the American police's purpose is to arrest Blacks illegally because of the latter's blackness which is seen as a threat to the American nation. The protagonist's persecution attests not only of his plight as a black person on the American soil, but more of all African Americans who unceasingly endure the white Americans' racist system. Their aim is, in fact, "*to remind them of their inferior position in a nation that declares itself as a land of democracy, but ends up oppressing its own inhabitants on the behalf of the skin color*" (N'zambi-Mikoulou: 2021, 69).

Jefferson's persecution by white American police officers is a way for the latter to avenge Gropé, their deceased brother. But what the reader does not understand is the fact that they do not avenge Brother and Bear who have been shot dead by Gropé while drinking some beers at the latter's bar. This means that they do not regret the killing of these black male characters whose death is viewed as a good riddance by all white Americans because of the color of their skin. Here is the way the author depicts the circumstances in which they are killed:

Bear had been drinking, and his eyes were glossy, he walked unsteadily, grinning all the time as he continued around the counter. "Go back" Gropé told him. "I mean the last time now-go back." Bear continued. Gropé moved quickly toward the cash register, where he withdrew a revolver and started shooting. Soon there was shooting from another direction. When it was quiet again, Bear, Gropé, and Brother were all down on the floor, and only Jefferson was standing (*ALBD*, p. 5).

This passage shows that Brother and Bear are no longer alive. Their death is not to be seen as the result of a given disease, but of their killing by Gropé, a white male character who is the owner of the bar where they were drinking. The reason for which he has killed them is linked to the fact that they did not accept to leave the bar when they were forced to do so, because they were short of money to afford the buying of their beers in his bar. Jefferson being the only person found in this place of murders, is immediately suspected and accused of being responsible for these mourning events. The result of this accusation is that he is jailed, judged and sentenced to death: "*The judge told Jefferson that he had been found guilty of the charges brought against him, and that the judge saw no reason that he should not pay for the part he played in this horrible crime. Death by electrocution. The governor would set the date*" (*ALBD*, p. 9). The verdict given against him by the judge shows that Blacks cannot win a trial before Whites in the United States, for one sees how Jefferson is persecuted for a crime he has not really committed.

Jefferson's accusation attests of racial conflicts between Blacks and Whites in the United States. The simple fact of being present at the moment and place of Gropé's murder urges his white fellows not only to accuse, but more to judge and condemn him to death. While he is being judged, some Whites express their desire of seeing him dead, as the narrator puts it in these terms: "*Twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. Justice? (...) We, us, white folks all, have decided it's time for you to die, because this is the convenient date and time*" (*ALBD*, pp. 157-158). The way these white men fight for Jefferson's death shows how ready they are to kill a black man mercilessly for an unknown reason. This means that this black male character's death will be a good riddance for them, for they have hatred for him because of his racial belonging. Gropé's death which is supposed to be the cause of his accusation and persecution by the American police officers is just an alibi they have found to shorten his life. What is true is that Whites do not like Blacks, as Edgar Hoover, a white character in Julius Lester's *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* says it openly to John Calvin Marshall who fights for Blacks' civil rights:

I have never liked you. I think you're the most dangerous man in America. I think you have misled the Negro and stirred up trouble for no reason. You want too Much too soon and the white people of this country will never stand for it. If you aren't careful somebody is going to kill you and I say good riddance. I am a patriot, a true American – I love my country and anyone who is a threat to it is my enemy (Lester: 1994, 58-59).

Throughout Edgar Hoover's utterances, one notices a total rejection of black Americans pictured through John Calvin Marshall who is seen as a false American because of his black skin color. This false identity of Blacks is what pushes Hoover to express his feelings of hatred for this black male character as it is the case of Jefferson whose life is about to be shorten because of a crime which he does not recognized. This hatred urges them to take Gropé's death as a perfect opportunity to end his life. Gaines's efforts to account for Jefferson's accusation and sentence by his white fellows are so excessive that he continues to bring evidence of the verdict given by the judges at Court in these terms: *"The jury, twelve white men good and true, still sentenced him to death. Now his godmother wants me to visit him and make him know-prove to these white men- that he's not a hog, that he's a man. I'm supposed to make him a man"* (ALBD, p. 31). Here, the word "hog" is the insult hurled at Jefferson while being judged by white judges. This insult shows that he is not judged for the charges brought against him, but for his black skin color which is the main cause of racism in the United States. When Miss Emma, his godmother, claims that he is not a hog but a man, she shows her attachment to the black race. This attachment attests of her readiness to fight for the integrity of this race which is about to collapse because of the white man's racist system. One may argue that Miss Emma is totally opposed to the decision taken by the Court members to sentence Jefferson to death. For her, he is innocent and should not be victim of such a cruel act.

Unfortunately, Whites' desire to victimize Jefferson by any means necessary due to his blackness urges them to look at him as a robber and murder, as evidenced in this passage: *"The jury retired, and it returned a verdict after lunch: guilty of robbery and murder in the first degree. The judge commended the twelve white men for reaching a quick and just verdict"* (ALBD, p. 8). As it can be seen, "robbery" and "murder" are the charges brought against Jefferson who is sentenced to death. Despite this quick verdict, what is worth knowing is that Jefferson is not guilty of the accusations brought against his personality. For, the narrator claims that he has only been present at the place of murder and that he does not see why they have to kill him:

The defense argued that Jefferson was innocent of all changes except being at the wrong time. There was no proof that there had been a conspiracy between himself and the other two. The fact that Mr Gropé shot only Brother and Bear was proof of Jefferson's innocence. Why did Mr.Gropé shoot one by twice and never shoot at Jefferson once ? Because Jefferson was merely an innocent bystander. He took the whiskey to calm his nerves, not to celebrate. He took the money out of hunger and plain stupidity (*ALBD*, p. 7).

This passage attests of Jefferson's innocence with regard to the death of Gropé. When the narrator claims that he has only been present at the wrong time and place, he shows that the white court members' verdict against him is totally wrong. This verdict is a perfect illustration of their racist attitude towards their black peers in the United States. It is indeed in this regard that a black soldier during the Second World War in John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* calls this great nation "*the United Snakes of America*" (Killen: 1963, 87). Jefferson's innocence is proved by the fact that he was not shot dead by Gropé who killed Brother and Bear. He was simply a witness of the scene:

They sentence you to death because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, with no proof that you had anything at all to do with the crime other than being there when it happened. Yet six months later they come and unlock your cage and tell you, We, us, white folks, have decided it's time for you to die, because this is the convenient date and time (*ALBD*, p. 158).

Through this passage, one understands that there is no proof which makes Jefferson responsible for Gropé's death. His being present at the latter's place of murder does not automatically mean that he is the culprit of this tragic event. What is hidden behind Whites' eagerness to kill him mercilessly through an electric chair is the hatred they have not only for him, but for all black Americans seen as animals because of their blackness. Whites' racist attitude which consists in killing their black peers does not derive from Gaines's personal imagination. For, Tushar Kansa also states that "*killers of white victims were still three times more likely to be sentenced to death than comparably situated killers of non-white victims*".⁴ This quotation shows that in the United States, Blacks are not judged the same way as Whites. While the latter continue to enjoy the full fruition of life after committing crimes, Blacks are, however, accused, judged and sentenced to death innocently. This racist behavior which is seen as "*a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit*" (King: 1967, 12), urges Grant, a black male character, to reject the court members' decision in these terms:

Don't tell me to believe. Don't tell me to believe in the same God or laws that men believe in who commit these murders. Don't tell me to believe that God can bless this country and that men are judged by their peers. Who among his peers judged him? Was I there? Was the minister there? Was Harry Williams there? Was Farell Jarreau? Was my aunt? Was Vivian? No, his peers did not judge him –and I will not believe (*ALBD*, p. 251).

This passage evidences Grant's discontent about the court members' verdict announcing Jefferson's condemnation. For him, the American Court is crammed with injustice for sentencing an innocent citizen on behalf of his blackness. When he questions that "was I there? Was the minister there? Was Harry Williams there?", he means that since Blacks have no representatives in this American Court, he cannot trust the decision taken against his black fellow whose ill-treatment by Whites may urge him to prefer death to life, as Frederic Douglass declares about himself: "*For my part, I should prefer death to hopeless bondage*" (Douglass: 1845, 124).

2. Jefferson's episode of life in prison

A reading of Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* makes the reader understand that Jefferson is accused of murder by white Americans in the United States. Two main reasons justify his accusation: The first is the fact that he has been present at the moment and place of Gropé's death. The second is linked to Whites' hatred not only for him, but for all Blacks because of the color of their skin which, for them, dirties the American nation. It is indeed because of these two reasons that the American court members find it better to get rid of him in American society by putting him into jail for a period of time before shortening his life through the use of an electric chair. The author accounts for this black male character's sequences of life in prison through Grant Wiggins and Miss Emma who often visit him in his jail cell:

The deputy walked a step ahead of us, with Miss Emma directly behind him, and me beside her. At the end of the corridor, we would climb the steps to the first landing, where the deputy would wait a minute to allow Miss Emma to catch her breath, then we would continue on up to the next floor and through the heavy steel door to the cellblock. (...) Then we would move down the line to the last cell. Jefferson always lay on the bunk, either looking at the ceiling or facing the wall. Each time, the deputy opened the door and locked us in. Jefferson had no more to talk about the second or third time than he did the first, and after we had spent an hour with him, we were let out (*ALBD*, pp. 75-76).

What the author portrays in this passage is Jefferson's sequences of life in prison where he is forbidden to welcome visitors without the Deputy's allowance. Grant Wiggins and Miss Emma are described as the ones who provide him with food and money thanks to which he can buy something to eat or drink. Jefferson's tough life in prison is evidenced through the way he is condemned to spend the day "laying on the bunk, looking at the ceiling or facing the wall". This pitiful and painful life experienced by him for a crime which is not his, attests of all Whites' wrongful view not only over him, but over all Blacks in the United States. For, he is used as an example of these people who endure racial discrimination in this democratic nation. Gaines's

portrayal of Jefferson's episode of life in prison is so evident that Grant Wiggins continues to evidence it in these terms:

The prisoners would hear us coming, and they would stand at the cell doors with their hands stuck out between the bars. As she had done the first time, Miss Emma promised that they could have the food Jefferson did not eat. As I had done the first time, I gave them the change I had in my pockets, which was always less than a dollar (*ALBD*, p. 75).

Through this passage, the author deals with Jefferson's experience in prison. For, he demonstrates how this black male character continues to be visited by Grant Wiggins, his black fellow who does his best to find food for him. The fact that he does not eat the food brought to him by him does not mean that the food is not delicious; it only means that he has lost his appetite because of the tortures he endures daily from white American officers for a crime he has not committed. Her godmother is taken here as the embodiment of all those black American women who have mercy on their black fellows. Her coming to Jefferson's jail cell regularly attests of Blacks' solidarity in the white man's world. This solidarity is certainly what the author wants people to evidence not only in the United States where racism reigns, but in any part of the world where social situations are inevitable. Jefferson's suffering in prison is a bit similar to that of Eric Garner, a black male character who, in Matt Taibbi's *I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street*, suffers in the hands of white American police officers for unknown reasons:

On September 1, 2007, at 7: 30 p.m. on the corner of Castalton Ave, Heberton stopped me for reasons of their own. I was ordered to my hands on the back SUV in which they were riding in. I complied with no problem. Officer William Owens then patted me down by ways of going through my pockets and socks and not finding anything illegal on my person.⁵

From this passage, one sees that the American police's purpose is to arrest and jail Blacks pretending to have caught them with drug or other illegal substances. Eric Garner's persecution evidences the plight of all African Americans who unceasingly endure the white Americans' racist system. Their aim is, in fact, to remind them of their inferior position in the United States. When Eric Garner claims that "my pockets and socks and not finding anything illegal on my person", he clearly tells the reader of his innocence about his arrest. This means that the author through this black male character shows how Blacks' rights are violated by their white counterparts, for one sees how Eric Garner undergoes brutality from the Officer William Owens for an unknown reason. Gaines's account for Jefferson's experience in a jail cell is so excessive that he continues to describe how his hands and feet are bound together by white police officers who fear his running away:

I heard the chains out along the cellblock before I saw anyone. Then they came in, Jefferson in front, shackled, walking with short steps, his head bowed and his shoulders stooped. They came up to the table, and Paul told him to sit down. He sat without looking at me, his shoulders hanging low and closer together than they should be (*ALBD*, p. 137).

In this passage, Jefferson's difficult moments in prison are evident, for one sees how he is treated just like an animal with his hands and feet tied. This is a way for white American officers to prevent him from walking as usual, as evidenced by the phrase "walking with short steps". Such a wrongful treatment endured by this black character attests not only of his plight on the American soil, but more of the inferior position he occupies before the white man who takes him for granted. For, he is accused, judged, jailed and tortured unjustly because of his physical appearance. Here is the way the narrator continues to tell the reader about his episode of life in prison:

When I came up there a couple of days later, the chief deputy told me I could meet Jefferson in his cell or in the dayroom. I told him it didn't matter to me where we met. The chief deputy told me it didn't matter to him either, but he told Paul to take me to the dayroom. I sat at the center table, just as Miss Emma and my aunt and Reverend Ambrose had two days before. And I heard the chains out along the cellblock before I saw anyone (id.,).

This passage is a perfect illustration of Jefferson's life in the American prison, for one sees how he is assisted by his black fellows who despite their daily activities, devote their precious time to visiting him. Their assistance to him attests of their love for him as a person who belongs to their race. The fact that this race is hated and rejected by their white peers does not make them abandon their black fellow who suffers the white man's racist system. Through Jefferson's visitors at a jail cell, the author shows the kind of attitude people should have towards one another. He certainly invites them to act as such whenever one of them is in trouble. But Jefferson's victimization by Whites is for the author a way to mean that white people do not consider Blacks as native citizens of the United States, for this victimization is due to the color of their skin: "*They (black people) live in a society in which to be unconditionally American is to be white and to be black is a misfortune*" (Ture and Hamilton: 1967, 32). Jefferson's unfair treatment in prison as a black person is far from being from the author's personal imagination; it is grounded in the American history. For, like him, the historical Eric Garner, too, endured the same injustice from Whites because of a crime he did not commit:

On September 1st, 2007, seven years before NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo would choke Eric Garner to death in a video watched all the world, he filed a heart-breaking civil complaint against NYPD Officer William Owens, the city of New York, and the NYPD over an awful incident in

which he was illegally strip searched near his home. In the complaint, Eric Garner's rectum and made Eric pull his underwear completely down.⁶

As it can be seen, like the real-life Eric Garner who is brutalized by the Officer William Owens for an unknown reason, Jefferson, too, is conscious of the way he is treated by Whites. He knows it in advance that, as a black man, he is far from being heard or understood, because there is no law guarantying the rights of Blacks as human beings in the United States. His painful life in prison is nothing but the result of all white Americans' hatred for the black race. He means that his being accused of murder is an alibi for white Americans to torture him mercilessly as a way to remind Blacks of their position of second zone citizens in all the spheres of the United States. For, in this great nation, the police are viewed as an institution created to protect the rights of Whites and trample down those of Blacks. This implies that the main cause of Jefferson's jailing by the American police officers is not actually linked to Gropé's death, but to his racial belonging which, for them, is a threat to the American nation. That is why, whenever a Black is suspected or accused of being the culprit of a given crime, he is doomed to receive a severe punishment that may lead him to death, as the author shows it through Jefferson in the section below.

3. Jefferson's death

In Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson's death does not happen accidentally, for many Americans are aware of the decision taken by the court members with regard to the charges brought against him. This decision reveals that he is going to be killed because, for Whites, he is responsible for Gropé's death. Here is the way the narrator enlightens the reader about the pitiful promise made to him:

Do you know what is going to happen to someone just like you who sat right where you're sitting only a few years ago? All right, I'll tell you. They're going to kill him in Bayonne. They're going to sit him in a chair, they're going to tie him down with straps, they're going to connect wires to his head, to his wrists, to his legs and they're going to shoot electricity through the wires into his body until he's dead (*ALBD*, p. 39).

Through this passage, the author demonstrates the fate reserved not only to Jefferson who is promised to die because of a crime he has not really committed, but to any black individual who may dare to challenge the white man's laws in the United States. If he is not forced to sit down on an electric chair with his hands and feet tied, he will see his body connected with electric wires until he dies. Such an inhuman practice shows the degree of white Americans'

hatred and pitilessness for their black counterparts in this great nation. The promise of being killed made to Jefferson by the court members urges him to think back to what was happening to his black fellows in jail cells in Florida. He thinks that the same tragic end endured by these black fellows will happen to him. He is going to be dragged to an electric chair, and there will be no one capable of helping him, as the narrator evidences it in these terms:

And my mind went back to that cell uptown, then to another cell, somewhere in Florida. After reading about the execution there, I had dreamed about it over and over. As vividly as if I were there, I had seen that cell, heard that boy crying while being dragged to that chair, please, Joe Louis, help me. Please help me, help me. And after he had been strapped in the chair, the man who wrote the story could still hear him cry. Mr. Joe Louis, help me. Mr. Joe Louis, help me (*ALBD*, p. 91).

As it can be seen, dying on electric chair is a tragic end reserved not only to Jefferson, but to all black Americans who suffer the pressure of racial discrimination in the United States. The author's reference to these black individuals who were killed in a jail cell in Florida is a way to tell the reader that Jefferson is not the first Black to be killed like that. Such a Whites' way of killing Blacks on behalf of the law attests of the latter's nothingness on the American soil, for they are killed just like animals, sometimes because of uncommitted crimes:

There was always news coming back to the quarter about someone who had been killed or sent to prison for killing someone else: Snowball, stabbed to death at a nightclub in Port Allen; Claude, killed by a woman in New Orleans; Smith, sent to the state penitentiary at Angola for manslaughter. And there were others who did not go anywhere but simply died slower (*ALBD*, p. 51).

This passage shows that Blacks are fed up with news announcing the killing of one or two of them in American prisons. For, there are many of them who are unjustly killed in New Orleans. This means that the news about the killing of Jefferson in a jail cell does not astonish them, for they know it in advance that as a black man who is pretended to have committed a crime, he is doomed to die. The author accounts for his killing through a black woman who, after hearing the noise coming from the courthouse, asks the clerk about what was happening:

The woman asked, the clerk behind the counter if she had heard it. The clerk asked, 'Heard what?' The woman talked about noise that was coming from the courthouse. The clerk said that being inside, they heard very little from that far away. The woman shook her head and said, 'It was just horrible'. Just too horrible. The clerk told the woman that her little boy had asked her last night what was going to happen at the jail today, and she said that the sheriff just had to put an old bad nigger away (*ALBD*, p. 242).

The noise heard by the white female character is that of Jefferson who cries on an electric chair while being killed by white American officers, as decided by the court members. This

killing which he does not deserve, shows Whites' willingness to live in a country deprived of the black skin color. For, they think this color constitutes a great hindrance to the development of the American nation. When the narrator says that the woman "shakes her head", he shows her shock and pitifulness for her black brother who has just died because of the white man's wrongful attitude towards all Blacks. For her, Jefferson should be released from prison, because he has simply been present at the place of Gropé's death. Unfortunately, Whites see this point of view as a simple claim for justice denied to Blacks for years. Jefferson's unjustified killing recalls that of John Calvin Marshall, the black male character who, in Julius Lester's *And All Our Wounds Forgiven*, is shot dead by Whites for the simple reason that he fights for the civil rights denied to Blacks for years in the American society: "No more so than after my assassination" (Lester: 1994, 21). This mourning event evidences to some extent the weaknesses of the American Court, as Hodges confesses it in these terms: "The Court decision was illegal and against the rights of the State" (Hodges: 1974, 230).

What is worth knowing is that Jefferson is killed on an electric chair. His killing is a way for white Americans to show to the remaining Blacks the fate reserved to them in the United States whenever they are responsible or pretended to be responsible for a given crime. This death recalls that of the historical Eric Garner who died in the hands of white American officers because of an unfair reason: "On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner, 43, died after being wrestled to the ground by police officers and placed in a chokehold in New York City" (Moore et al.: 2018, 37). This quotation shows that although suffering from asthma, Eric Garner's death was rushed by the American police officers' violence against him. Jefferson's horrible death in Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* also recalls that of the historical George Stinney, a fourteen-year-old African American young boy who was judged, sentenced to death and killed through the use of an electric chair by white Americans after being accused of killing two white American girls, Betty and Mary, in the United States. During his trial, the court members were composed only of white Americans, and his parents were prohibited to be seen in the audience room. Despite his pleading for innocence with the Bible in his hands, Whites did their best to show his responsibility in the charges brought against him. They put him into jail for eighty-one days before shortening his life. Seventy years later, his innocence was finally evidenced by one of white American judges who confessed that he was only killed because of his racial belonging.⁷

Conclusion

At the end of this exploration, I have discovered that Ernest James Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* intertwines with the experience of black Americans in the United States, for the author portrays their victimization through his main character before their consideration by their white peers as full American citizens. His account for Jefferson as a black character who suffers the white man's racist system, evidences the plight of all Blacks in the United States. This black character's killing is a conceptual tool that shows the interplay between history and fiction in this literary text, because this tragic event draws the reader back to the experience of Blacks in this great nation. Jefferson's killing by Whites for an uncommitted crime attests of the latter's degree of hatred for all Blacks viewed as foreigners in American society.

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