

# New Historicism as Portrayed in Ernest Gaines' "A Lesson Before Dying"

Set in the 1940s in a small Cajun community in the South, Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* narrates the experiences of a black man in his middle ages, Jefferson, who is unfortunately convicted to die over a murder he did not commit and a teacher Grant, who hopes to make the convicts' situation more bearable. The narration in *A Lesson Before Dying* evidently explores the tense racial relations that reflects the author's times. On the underlying racial attitudes that are displayed in the text, the author is heavily influenced by his prejudice, beliefs and environment as he experienced it then. From the onset, Gaines adopts a more affirming demeanor towards the entire spread of Southern traditional rural culture and how it played out against racial fragmentation in the 1940s.

Gaines biographer Abrams Dennis notes that he often displays a bias for the Southern rural folk tradition in all his work. Gaines always found it difficult to divorce his own historical identity, based on his own upbringing in the former slave quarters in the Southern plantations, from his work (Abrams 5). It is as a result of this phenomenon that instances of historicism have become a norm in any of Gaines' work. Abrams infers that this familiarity always afforded Gaines a basis for authority in his own writing (6).

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, new historicism is depicted in the author's depiction of the plot and his two core characters. Just like the 1940s, Gaines presents Grant as a prisoner of his skin color. Although he is well educated, his racial background gives him very limited career options. Grant is a teacher who hates teaching and everything else around him. However, he sticks to the profession because it was the only viable choice for black people. In the 1940s, blacks could enter in extremely limited number of professions. You could be a barber, an undertaker or you could own a nightclub or a small grocery shop. Also just like Grant, you could be a teacher and teach black kids. However, it was extremely difficult to find black southerners in high flying careers like banking or politics. Blacks could not run for political office, neither could they be admitted in professional societies of doctors and attorneys.

Grant wishes to run away from this predicament. He knows that his superior education could meet a befitting career in a better world somewhere else. However, constant pressure from Miss Emma and his aunt, Tante Lou ensure that he remains in the South. Grant eventually gets involved with Jefferson's plight. This is mutually benefiting as Jefferson helps Grant to find himself and Grant, through his teachings, encourages Jefferson to enjoy what is left of his life and to die with dignity.

The racial inclinations in the justice system that have always been inherent in the American criminal justice system are not spared by Gaines' historicism either. In an opinion piece penned in the *Washington Post*, Bill Quigley, the former Legal Director for the Center for Constitutional Rights infers that the criminal justice system in the United States has always been a race-based institution. According to Quigley, the justice system unfairly targets African Americans who are often profiled and punished in a more aggressive manner compared to their white counterparts. In his own essay, *Writing A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines admits that the events in the essay heavily borrows from the racially skewed criminal justice system in the United States, then up to now.

While planning on writing the essay, Gaines stated that he visited Angola the Louisiana State prison where he chanced upon a 1946 case where a black man was being convicted for murder. Admittedly, through the help of a warden, Gaines borrowed some information for his work from the 1946 case material. Both young men were black and illiterate or semi illiterate. Jefferson could write but he could not capitalize letters or punctuate sentences in his notebook. Both were accused of murdering a white man. Although in the 1946 case the young man gave a confession, Gaines' character would maintain his innocence throughout the trial. In both cases, only white men sat in the jury. Both men were summarily executed for their offences only that one was more of a victim of a racial justice system compared to the other.

In *Writing a Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines stated that while developing the character of Jefferson, he knew that he would be eventually sentenced to die. According to Gaines, in the forty's in Louisiana, if his own persona had been caught within the vicinity of a scene where a white man had been murdered, with a bottle of alcohol in his hand and wads of cash in his pocket, that alone constituted guilt. According to the author's own account, such is the perception that the criminal judicial system had on black people at the time. Resultantly, the author did not hesitate to replicate a similar scenario in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

## Works Cited

Abrams, Dennis. Ernest J. Gaines. New York: Chelsea House, 2010. Print.

Ernest Gaines. *Writing a Lesson Before Dying*.

Gaines, Ernest J. *A Lesson Before Dying*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2011. Print.