From Meaningless Life to Meaningful Death in Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*[1]

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Résumé: A travers *A Lesson Before Dying*, il est question de la façon dont un jeune homme noir est amené à proclamer sa valeur d'Homme dans sa confrontation avec la mort au sein d'une société où sa vie est dénuée de sens. Ainsi, sa mort doit accomplir ce qu'il n'a pu de son vivant. Cette étude examine la pertinence du concept de sacrifice dont le but visé est de normaliser les relations entre Blancs et Noirs. Notre préoccupation majeure étant d'examiner, dans une approche dialectique, le processus de la transcendance de la mort à travers le personnage de Jefferson.

Mots-clés: vie dénuée de sens, mort significative, sacrifice, régénération.

Introduction

> *The Negro's struggle now is for identity: what Du Bois knows as a sense of never being heard, and Ellison sees as the sense of never being seen, and James Baldwin calls not knowing his name. All of these are really the Negro's response to the unpleasant and untrue image projected by his world, purporting to be him and yet so clearly not him that in time he comes to wonder whether he does indeed exist at all.*[2]

Life and death are recurrent in almost all of Gaines' works. This coexistence of life and death conveys man's ephemeral passage on earth. In the process of man's evolution, death is the ultimate stage. It is the common destiny of any human being. From "a meaningless life" to "a meaningful death" could sound a little paradoxical. There is the idea of death in the concept of "meaningless life," and "meaningful death" connotes the idea of life. Eventually, one can assume that death equals life and life equals death. Or, there is life in death and death in life. It is this dialectical vision that is embodied in some of Gaines' fictional characters.

In Gaines' works, death, specifically that of black heroes is the "passport of humanity." *A Lesson Before Dying* is about the way Jefferson, a young black has to assert the value of his life by confronting death in a society where his life counts for nothing. His death must accomplish what his life could not. This paper seeks to analyse the concept of sacrifice

[1] Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*, New York, Knopf, 1993.
[2] Nancy M. Tischler, *Black Masks. Negro Characters in Modern Southern Fiction*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1969, P. 43.

relevant to the normative status in blacks and whites' relationships. Our basic concern is to present, in a dialectical approach, the process of death transcendence through Jefferson.

How does Jefferson's death acquire meaning after a life that is considered as meaningless? In other words, how does Jefferson transcend death? Indeed, Jefferson's death reveals blacks' humanity and projects the rupture of racial prejudice. How is this idea of rupture which appears as a paradoxical dynamic elaborated or fictionalized in Gaines' novel?

Thus, "from meaningless life to meaningful death" leads us to the exploration of Jefferson as a tragic hero in two sequences. The first sequence will show to what extent Jefferson's life appears meaningless, and the second shall take us to the analysis of Jefferson as an instrument of salvation, of salutary change.

I – Jefferson's Meaningless Life

Life can be defined as the period between birth and death, the experience or state of being alive. As for death, it is the end of life, the destruction of something. Life and death are somewhat linked by their opposition, and they are permanently in contradiction. Death negates life, or succeeds life. And for Epicure, the ancient philosopher, who was willing to dismiss the trauma of death in the living, death is the absence of life and life the absence of death. Therefore, he argues that we should not fear death, for when we are alive, death is not there; and when death overtakes us, we are no longer there.

If we assume then that death is the absence of life and life the absence of death, what could such phrases: "meaningless life" and "meaningful death" imply in Gaines's work? What is Gaines' assessment of life and death through his fiction? Does death actually negate life? It is through the development of Jefferson, the black character to be executed in *A Lesson Before Dying* that we will try to grasp the scope of a meaningless life and a meaningful death in Gaines's artistic vision.

Actually, death is sometimes perceived as a phenomenon that renders life meaningless. Yet, Jefferson's life is not meaningless because it ends in death. His life is meaningless because it is a life in which people would not be justified in taking great pride. The question about the meaning of life is a question about values. For a life to have a meaning, it has to have a purpose. It is that purpose that gives a value, an importance to that life or existence.

Therefore, a meaningless life here should not be sensed as life is meaningless because it ends in death. Here, a meaningless life is a life that has no meaning, a life that is less than important or a worthless life. A meaningless life is a life that is not important or not significant. It is an existence that doesn't matter or doesn't have any point. Jefferson's life, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, appears as the metaphor of blacks whose existence has been made worthless or purposeless by whites in the United-States. Throughout history, facts such as slavery and racism have definitely debased blacks' lives. These people's lives have been deprived of meaning, and Jefferson's is a case in point.

Jefferson's execution is allied to that of a human scapegoat. Why should Jefferson be executed? To answer this question is to delve into the white man's psychology and reveal his pathology about his deep feeling on the race matter. For whites, blacks should always be blamed, whether they are guilty or not.

Jefferson did not commit the crime he is accused of. He simply attended the shooting that took place between Old Grope, the white store keeper, and two young blacks. Both young blacks and Grope died out of the shooting, and Jefferson was found on the premise. On that only account, he has to be executed; he has to pay for the death of the white man. The death sentence is not pronounced against Jefferson because he is guilty of murder. But, he has to die because of his skin color, because of his race. Being black, Jefferson does not belong to the right race, and perhaps he is not "human" enough, as white people would think.

A white man has encountered death. Being a member of the alleged superior race, his death commands an equal suffering for the inferior race which stands as a scapegoat. In other words, the death of a member of that "superior" race shall bring punishment, pain, death among the members of the lower race. Indeed, in a paradoxical logic, he does not need to be guilty. His belonging to the inferior race sets him as an ideal victim in this logic of scapegoat as Edgar Morin accurately put:

> Le sacrifice devient très souvent un transfert purificateur qui écarte sur autrui (esclave ou animal) la nécessité de mourir. Il peut traduire même le souci obsédant d'échapper au talion, c'est-à-dire au châtiment en retour qu'appellent les crimes et les mauvais penchants. En effet, la structure intime du talion exige que nous payions de notre mort, non seulement nos meurtres réels, mais nos souhaits de mort. Le sacrifice, qui fait expier le bouc émissaire à notre place, apporte le soulagement de l'expiation elle-même.[3]

[3] Edgar Morin, *L'homme et la mort*, Paris, Editions Seuil, 1970, P.131.

Jefferson is the one who plays the role of that scapegoat for whites. The scapegoat is a person, group, or thing that bears the blame for the mistakes or crimes of others, or for some misfortune due to another agency. In fact, Jefferson is simply a victim of whites' racial prejudice against blacks. This prejudice can be explained through what Witney Young calls the "frustration aggression" theory:

> In simplest terms the frustration – aggression argument is as follows: denial of certain goals or gratifications leads to frustration, which is, at least in some situations, displaced from the causal agent of the frustration to an unrelated scapegoat. The scapegoat then becomes the object of aggressive behaviour, and this expression of aggression presumably has the cathartic effect of relieving frustration. When the choice of scapegoats becomes culturally stabilized on members of certain groups, racial or ethnic prejudice results because the expression of aggression is rationalized in terms of the alleged undesirable traits of the scapegoats.[4]

Actually, the death sentence or penalty that has been decided by the all-white jury is part of the logic of the power structure relations between whites and blacks. A white man who is supposed to be superior has met death in the presence of a black, a man of a lower species. This death demythologizes the white man. He becomes a human being, not a divinity, for he can die. As a consequence, the black witness of this weakness ought to be killed in order to restore the social or racial hierarchy and also to reassert the white manhood. Jefferson is thus an unfortunate person who has just been at the wrong time, at the wrong place. His death is to compensate for the loss of the white man. Jefferson can therefore be considered as a scapegoat whose death shall restore the mythical original order of racial superiority.

In addition, what the lawyers said of Jefferson at the court is the product of the society. Being a "hog," as he was called, is the result of the process of "animalisation" actually conditioned by the way of life imposed on blacks by the white society. Evidence in the novel is Jefferson's life as he laments:

> Who ever car'd my cross, Mr Wiggins? My mama? My daddy? They dropped me when I wasn't nothing. Still don't know where thet at this minute. I went in the field when I was six, driving that old water cart. I done pulled that cotton sack, I done cut cane, load cane, swung that ax, chop ditch banks, since I was six. Yes, I'm youman, Mr. Wiggins. But nobody didn't know that 'fore now. Cuss for nothing. Beat for nothing. Work for nothing. Grinned to get by. Everybody thought that's how it was s'pose to be. You too, Mr. Wiggins. You never thought I was nothing else. I didn't neither (p.224).

[4] Witney Young, *Beyond Racism*, New York, Mc Graw-Hill Book Company, 1969, P. 19.

Like all of his like, Jefferson is an unfortunate young black. He is both fatherless and motherless. In the book, the only person who is supposed to be close to him is Miss Emma, his godmother. This parental deprivation is surely a source of tremendous social and psychological handicap for him. For, generally, loving relationships are likely to enhance the significance of a life. Instead of loving relationships, Jefferson's life is filled with boredom, oppression and frustration that render his life meaningless.

Besides, Jefferson is victim of multifarious ill treatments and social inequities due to his race. Being a little child does not preclude Jefferson from hard work in which black adults are forced. He undergoes the same conditions as black adults. He works in fields, chops wood, etc., with the same rigueur as the other and older blacks.

Furthermore, the education Jefferson is entitled to is not an adequate one. It is limited, superficial and inappropriate. Grant Wiggins, the young black teacher is always complaining about that restrictive education that he finds vain and useless for blacks. And his life, like that of every young black man is predestined. Jefferson doesn't have any other choice than "to die violently," or "to be brought down to the level of beasts," or "to run and run" (p.62). Grant Wiggins, his teacher holds this argument from Mathew Antoine, an old teacher.

The judicial murder of Jefferson at close confirms what is mentioned above. Accused of having murdered a white man, a crime that he did not commit, Jefferson is to be executed on an electric chair. In other words, Jefferson did not have a fair trial. The verdict of the typical all-white jury was not but the will of the prejudiced whites who were intent on killing a black man for the death of a white man. So, Jefferson's death is the highest testimony of white people's injustice and oppression toward blacks.

All these details are an account of Jefferson's meaningless life. But this meaningless life can also be accounted by the fact that he was not related to any god. Indeed according to supernaturalism, one of the theories about the meaning of life, "one's existence is significant only if one has a certain relation with some purely spiritual being or realm. If neither a god nor a soul existed, or if they existed but one failed to relate to them in the right way, then one's life would be utterly meaningless."[5] As Thadeus Metz appropriately noted,

[5] Thadeus Metz, "The Concept of a Meaningful Life," in *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. 38, No. 2 (Apr., 2001), p.139.

> Of those who have analysed the concept of meaning in terms of relating to God, most have supposed that inquiring into the meaning of an individual's life is identical to asking how a person is related to a purpose that God has assigned. This view gains plausibility from the fact that the question of life's meaning is often associated with the question "Why am I here?" and this question, in turn, is naturally understood as asking for the reason for which one was created.[6]

In jail, Jefferson is "locked up in that cage like an animal" (p.182), and he behaves like a hog, as he has been treated. Indeed, Jefferson has lost his self-esteem. He refused to eat it the food (chicken, biscuits and sweet potatoes) that was brought to him by his godmother, Miss Emma, on the justification that it is: "for youmans" (p.83). And when she insists, he replies: "I'm a old hog. Youmans don't stay in no stall like this. I'm a old hog they fattening up to kill" (p.83). Eventually, he accepts to eat the food on his knees, exactly like an animal: "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" (p.83).

Jefferson here plays the role that has been imposed on him. He adopts an animal identity, for his human identity has been destroyed. It is this dehumanization that is perceived through his ways and attitudes. Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother is seriously hurt by that situation that she considers as an offense. It is humiliating and thus unacceptable. Her protest is here voiced "They called my boy a hog, Mr Henri. I didn't raise no hog, and I don't want no hog to go set in that chair. I want a man to go set in that chair" (p.20). What she pleads the white man for is not to save Jefferson's life. No, this is a lost case. Her concern is rather to assert Jefferson's dignity, or the dignity of the black race through Jefferson's death.

For that purpose, Miss Emma commits Grant Wiggins to make Jefferson understand his own humanity. In the following lines, Grant Wiggins gives details of the motive and his mission to Vivian, his girl friend:

> The public defender, trying to get him off, called him a dumb animal. He said it would be like tying a hog down into that chair and executing him – an animal that didn't know what any of it was all about. 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. Who am I? God? (31).

The mission is not an easy one. Nobody cared for Jefferson's life, and now they think he deserves their attention. Grant Wiggins, the teacher, seems to be pessimistic about Miss Emma's request: to transform Jefferson from hog to man. In his vision, there was nothing that

[6] Thadeus Metz, Ibid., p.141.

could be done for Jefferson who was already doomed. He confesses his pessimism in the presence of Tante Lou and Miss Emma:

> Tante Lou, Miss Emma, Jefferson is dead. It is only a matter of weeks, maybe a couple of months – but he's already dead. The past twenty-one years, we've done all we could for Jefferson. He's dead now. And I can't raise the dead. All I can do is try to keep the others from ending up like this – but he's gone from us. There's nothing I can do anymore, nothing any of us can do anymore (p.14).

How could one transform an animal into a human? How can Jefferson connect with intrinsic value beyond his animal nature? What are the specific intrinsic values that should be promoted in order for meaning to arise? To what extent can Jefferson's death transcend the limits imposed by whites on blacks? How is Jefferson supposed to cross them?

II – Death Transcendence or Jefferson's Meaningful Death

Death is part of the world ordinary experience. It threatens the self, as it asks for the individual's identity, and it is also the ultimate separation from social existence. Yet, death is also a liberator. It is in front of death that human beings reveal their true nature. What does Jefferson's death mean for blacks and whites' relationships? To what extent does the irrelevant life of Jefferson turn to be relevant when he is done away? It is the symbols of his death for whites as well as for blacks that addressed below. A meaningful death is a death that has a meaning, a death that is important, or relevant, not vain. Such a death is valuable or symbolic and has a useful gain. So, we are justified to raise the following question: what does Jefferson's death bring to the black and white communities?

Jefferson's death is not "natural"; that is, it is not out of illness, nor by accident. Jefferson is to be killed through an execution decided or ordered by white people. We can presume that behind Jefferson's execution lies the idea of a sacrifice. Indeed, Jefferson stands for a scapegoat for whites and turns to be a lamb for blacks. It is in these roles that Jefferson's death tends to carry a sense. The meaning of Jefferson's death lies in the transformation processes that occur in the novel. Indeed, his death can be perceived as a sacrifice that enacts a social change within the race, as well as between the races.

The black community feels hurt by the death sentence that has been unjustly pronounced against one of its member. Yet, that community, out of powerlessness, cannot change anything concerning the verdict. What it plans to do is to dispel the verbal offense of the lawyer who called Jefferson a hog. For the black community, it is a synecdoche used by

the white lawyer to deny humanity to all the black people. Therefore, this offense has to be dispelled. This reaction is initiated by Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother.

She entrusts the teacher Grant Wiggins with this mission, which aims at teaching Jefferson a lesson about being "a man" before death. In the process of carrying out this mission, something new occurs within the black community, that is: a new relationship between the young and the old, or between the ministers and the young militants in Gaines's works.

From the outset, Grant refused to collaborate with Reverend Ambrose, the minister who was committed to save Jefferson's soul. And later on, the clash between both men will eventually come to a resolution, as William R. Nash notes:

> The teacher and the preacher find a way to resolve their differences in the service of the common good, a resolution that enables them to help lay the foundations for a stronger group. Those foundations also offer members of the African-American community a chance to move beyond the racial boundaries and to forge human connections with whites, a development that provides the reader some hope.[7]

Thus, one of the first things that make Jefferson's death meaningful is the reconciliation between the young and the old through Grant Wiggins and Reverend Ambrose. Both enable the condemned young man to transform his own execution from meaningless death into a redemptive sacrifice. Jefferson's death closes down the gap between the old and the young. The resolution of this internal contradiction is crucial for the group in the perspective of the struggle for freedom and equality with the white race. Religion has always been one of the causes of their opposition. As William R. Nash argues: "Much of the old women's strength comes from their religion, a character trait that links them to other elderly people in Gaines's corpus; similarly, as in the other works, their religion is one of the causes of conflict with the younger generation that sees their devotion as a sign of weakness and ignorance."[8]

For the young, whites use some religious lessons to oppress blacks; and generally, the ministers are committed in the role of subjugating their fellow blacks. Usually, as William R. Nash mentions: "The minister's weakness and his inability to connect with young, militant African Americans suggests both an irreconcilable generational rupture within the African

[7] William R. Nash, "'You Think a Man Can't Kneel and Stand?' Ernest J. Gaines's Reassessment of Religion as Positive Communal Influence" in *A Lesson Before Dying*," in *Callaloo* 24.1 (2001), p.359.
[8] William R. Nash, Ibid., p.348.

American community and the fundamental uselessness of the church as an agent for meaningful change."[9]

In addition, for Jefferson's death to have a meaning, he has to take up a challenge. That challenge is the birth of a new order, a change in the relationships between blacks and whites, as Grant Wiggins argues in the following lines:

> We black men have failed to protect our women since the time of slavery. We stay here in the South and are broken, or we run away and leave them alone to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious circle – which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and maybe even if he tries to change it, it is too heavy a burden because of all the others who have run away and left their burdens behind. So he, too must run away if he is to hold on to his sanity and have a life of his own... what she (Miss Emma) wants is for him, Jefferson, and me to change everything that has been going on for three hundred years (pp. 166-167).

And when Vivian asked him whether that circle will "ever be broken", Grant replies: "It's up to Jefferson" (p.167). So, Jefferson is the one to take the cross of the members of his race. "Me, Mr. Wiggins. Me. Me to take the cross. Your cross, nannans cross, my own cross. Me, Mr. Wiggins. This old stumbling nigger. Y`all axe a lot, Mr. Wiggins", Jefferson first declared (p.224). To take the cross is to stand and challenge the southern code that debases blacks. Since slavery time up to now, blacks have failed to do it.

So, Jefferson stands as the community's lamb. He has to perform a task that is beneficial to his community. For his community, he has to confront death manly. Grant Wiggins urges him to do so in order to destroy an old myth: "White people believe that they're better than anyone else on earth – and that's a myth. The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth" (p.192).

Jefferson has to do something worthy of great admiration. His death must be useful to blacks. For that purpose, Jefferson has to transcend death first by transcending his animal nature. "The concept of meaning," as Thadeus Metz writes, "is the idea of connecting with intrinsic value beyond one's animal self. The animal self is constituted by those capacities that we share with (lower) animals, i.e., those not exercising reason."[10]

[9] William R. Nash, Op. Cit., p.346.
[10] Thadeus Metz, Op. Cit., p.147.

Next, to accomplish his unselfish duty, Jefferson has to adopt the values of a hero, as his mentor teaches him: « A hero does for others. He would do anything for people he loves, because he knows it would make their lives better" (p.191). From this standpoint, Jefferson will not fear death, for, as Edgar Morin argues: « Là où la société s'affirme au détriment de l'individu, là où en même temps l'individu ressent cette affirmation comme plus véridique que celle de son individualité, alors le refus et l'horreur de la mort s'estompent, se laissent vaincre ».[11]

Grant Wiggins has successfully prepared Jefferson with the help of the Reverend Ambrose. And the day of the execution, rather than a tormented and animalistic victim, Jefferson stood manly before death. The circumstances of his death prove that he is a man. This assertion of manhood is a lesson to Paul, the white deputy who witnessed the execution and later, reported to Grant:

> He was the strongest man in that crowded room, Grant Wiggins. He was, he was. I'm not saying this to make you feel good, I'm not saying this to ease your pain. Ask that preacher, ask Harry Williams. He was the strongest man there. We all stood jammed together, no more than six, eight feet away from that chair. We all had each other to lean on. When Vincent asked him if he had any last words, he looked at the preacher and said, Tell Nannan I walked. And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked. I'm a witness. Straight he walked (pp. 253-254).

This passage invokes Paul, the white deputy's subscription to the value exalted by Jefferson. He is now convinced of the human nature in Jefferson, the essence which all men share. Thus, Jefferson's death unifies blacks and whites. Through death, Jefferson reveals blacks' humanity. His death is the birth of blacks' humanity, the dawn, a starting point of a new kind of relationship between blacks and whites. His death is the end of his life but also the end of an important racial prejudice against blacks. As Grant reports, nature is also a great witness of that historical change which is being triggered by Jefferson's execution: "It was a nice day. Blue sky. Not a cloud. Across the road in the Freemans yard, I could see a patch of white lilies on either side of the walk that led up to the porch..." (p.247).

And beyond all, Jefferson has accepted to die for the black community. His sacrifice is like planting a seed. Like a seed, a life that is sacrificed brings forth a new life. Through his sacrifice, there is a regeneration of blacks. This implies that it is through death that blacks acquire life. Their life is possible out of Jefferson's death. By asserting his individual value,

[11] Edgar Morin, Op. Cit., Pp.50-51.

the black race absorbs an intensified life. Out of this assertion, one can say that death lies across life, and the confrontation between the two gives life meaning. Jefferson's death is the symbol of resurrection for blacks as well as for whites. His death brings a salutary change.

In sum, reconciliation, resurrection, and humanity are the key symbols of the death of somebody whose life was "meaningless." In fact, Gaines makes Jefferson die in order that his life may have significance. His death marks a beginning rather than an end. Through his death that turns out to be a sacrifice, Jefferson saves his fellows; he dies to redeem his own life and the lives of the black community. In other words, Jefferson becomes a Christ symbol when he dies like a tragic hero. We can say that he sacrificed his worthless, debased life for his community to be redeemed.

Jefferson's death breeds shame in the white community and plants the seeds of change. His death effects a change in the white man's mind, as Paul, the white prison agent who has witnessed the scene of execution later could testify before Grant the courage and humanity of Jefferson. Through Jefferson's heroic death, all the black community acquires a human identity. Asserting thus their humanity, blacks get rid of their legendary blanket of invisibility to be visible.

Conclusion

Death is a constant presence in Gaines' works. Most of his heroes are tragic heroes. The death they meet always means something that eventually evolves into the means for the salvation of their fellow blacks. Generally, it is the way they confront death that make them "immortal." In dying for the community, they instil within the members of that community some values that will even outlive in the coming generations. In other words, those heroes will survive in the memories of their compatriots. Like the death of Marcus in *Of Love and Dust*, Ned Douglass and Jimmy Aaron in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, or Big Charlie in *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines resorts to the sacrifice of Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying*, certainly to impart a symbolic message of sacrifice, honor and dignity. This sacrifice simultaneously shows the cruelty of whites and the heroism of victimized blacks.

Through our analysis, we sought to show Jefferson's death as a rite of passage for both black and white races. His death makes the occurrence of basic change in blacks and whites' world view and eases the transition to a new society. Actually, in *A Lesson Before Dying,* Gaines hints at two lessons. The first is the one that is addressed to Jefferson, the

young black who is to be executed; and the second is what his death teaches whites. Jefferson receives a lesson to confront death like a man, and when he succeeds in doing it, his death triggers in whites a new awareness about blacks. Jefferson's death crushes in whites the racial prejudices held by them, and that make them look down on blacks. Jefferson's death brings a new image for blacks; it illuminates the reality about blacks, the reality that whites have refused to see so far.

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