Jefferson Essay, Research Paper

Jefferson Dies, But Is Not Defeated

Jefferson, a black man condemned to die by the electric chair in the novel A Lesson Before Dying by Ernest J. Gaines, is perhaps the strongest character in African-American literature today. Jefferson is a courageous young black man that a jury of all white men convicts of a murder he has not committed ; yet he still does not let this defeat destroy his personal character. Ernest Gaines portrays Jefferson this way to illustrate the fundamental belief that mankind s defeats do not necessarily lead to his destruction. The author uses such actions as Jefferson still enjoying outside comforts, showing compassion towards others, and trying to better himself before dying. These behaviors clearly show that although society may cast Jefferson out as a black murderer, he can still triumph somewhat knowing that he retains the qualities of a good human being.

The first trait Jefferson demonstrates after his incarceration is the fact that he still enjoys the outside comforts of small things such as a radio and diary. The fact that Jefferson still wants these things shows his imprisonment does not defeat him. In one of his last diary entries, Jefferson says , shef guiry ax me what I want for my super an I tol him I want nanan to cook me som okra an rice an som pok chop an a conbred an som claba (232). Jefferson still enjoys his aunt s cooking, an outside pleasure from prison.

The fact that he can still take pleasure from these small outside things clearly demonstrates that Jefferson enjoys a small victory over the world that has locked him away.

The second characteristic that shows society does not defeat Jefferson is Jefferson s remaining strong compassion for everyone around him. This shows that through defeat, Jefferson remains a strong person by not holding any grudges against his incarcerators. A selection from his diary reads, This was the firs time I cry when they lok that door bahind me the very firs time I was cryin cause of the bok an the marble he giv me and cause o the people that com to see me (231). Jefferson displays tenderness, which is an obvious sign that Jefferson has not let his imprisonment destroy him.

The final attribute Gaines uses in A Lesson Before Dying to show Jefferson s lack of destruction is his trying to better himself before dying. Jefferson does this by repeatedly seeing Grant Wiggins and Reverend Ambrose in prison before his execution. He initially refuses their help, but eventually gives in and realizes that their help is very important and essential to him becoming a better person before he dies. Observing yet another diary entry from Jefferson, Im sory I cry when you say you aint comin back tomoro im strong an reveren ambros gon be yer wit me you been good to me mr wigin nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im sombody (232). This passage has relevance in the fact that it shows how much Jefferson cares about his visits from Grant Wiggins and Reverend Ambrose because they make him feel like a better man; thus showing society does not defeat Jefferson as a human being.

These three qualities of Ernest Gaines work A Lesson Before Dying are evidence that the world can not destroy Jefferson. Jefferson is a tremendously strong character that suffers many travails throughout the novel, and finds a way to overcome all of them. He is one of the best examples in literature that a man can overcome many defeats without destruction. Jefferson proves that as long as a man can still take comfort in things, show compassion for others, and better himself; he will never destruct as a human being. This is one of the most important lessons to be learned from a literary character.

Works Cited

Gaines, Ernest. A Lesson Before