Robbing the Fire of Knowledge in a Leftist Perspective

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Abstract:

Against a backdrop of racism, the South willingly maintains his citizens of color in the darkness of ignorance by perpetuating a poor school system. In a social perspective, our analysis shows the topicality of the issue of education in Gaines' fiction namely in *A Lesson before Dying*. He invites his people to a constructive action that will break the vicious circle of ignorance. In a historicist fiction which situates him in the African American literary tradition of social writing, he exhorts the black leadership to abandon their resignation and cynicism.

Keywords: Education, ignorance, racism, leadership,

Résumé :

Dans un contexte de racisme, le Sud maintient volontiers ses citoyens de couleur dans l'obscurité de l'ignorance, en perpétuant un système scolaire médiocre. Dans une perspective sociocritique, notre analyse du roman d'Ernest Gaines intitulé *A Lesson before Dying* montre la pertinence de la question de l'éducation. Gaines invite son peuple à une action constructive dans le but de briser le cercle vicieux de l'ignorance. Dans une fiction historiciste qui le situe dans la tradition littéraire afro-américaine du roman à préoccupation sociale, il exhorte les dirigeants noirs à abandonner leur résignation et leur cynisme.

Mots clés : Education, ignorance, racism, leadership

INTRODUCTION

From a figurative perspective, fire has had several uses among which is the well-known promethean myth. Kindled by his love for mankind, Prometheus' mischief celebrates humanism and its triumph over determinism. By and large, the myth advocates progress as Prometheus is believed to have compensated the natural frailty of human-beings with the infinite possibilities of science and technology. Thus, fire is reminiscent of the enlightenment of education which has become as vital to modern life as light is to the night.

Consequently, depriving a group of individuals from their right to good education can amount today to a crime. Yet, the New World, namely the Southern part of the United States of America was once known for its peculiar institution and its racist code committed to the social enslavement of the black race. In fact, the history of the African-Americans had been punctuated by a series of refusals. To make sure its citizens of color live outside the mainstream, the South had established an ideology referred to as the doctrine of "separate but equal'. Among other things, this set of beliefs advocated an ersatz of education devoted to their intellectual enslavement.

In their vast majority, African-Americans intellectuals and especially black writers were very vocal in the face of such an injustice. In trying to prove their right to a common humanity, they had to strive to invalidate racial biases often entrenched in the idea that Africans were not humans, since they were ignorant and illiterate people. Throughout American history, the African slaves and later on their descents will prove that there was no rational basis to these racist considerations.

Yet, three hundred years later, some writers like Ernest J. Gaines who is among "the most widely read and highly respected contemporary authors of African American fiction", still found it relevant to mention the topic of education, as it affects black people. (W. Andrews 1997: 367) In his book entitled *A Lesson before Dying*, he draws a realistic and colorful picture of life in the South during the 1940s, the issue of education occupies a conspicuous place (E. Gaines 1998).

Some may question the necessity of this historicist project which consists in delving into the past or they may argue that the topic of education has been sufficiently dealt with. But its persistence may be the sign of its topicality. In any case, as it is with all realistic literatures, the fiction of Gaines can be seen as writing with a strong focus on social issues. As a matter of fact, our analysis will be a social reading composed of two parts based on the studies of literary theorists such as Pierre Zima and Edmond Cros.

The first part will show how the South willingly maintains its citizens of color in the darkness of ignorance to better exploit them. Then, the second part will deal with an invitation to the black leadership to bring the light of education to the masses.

I. In the Dark Cave of Ignorance

The title of this novel sets the scene for the issue of education. There may be other relevant topics worthy of our scrutiny like the overall injustice of the Southern racist system which serves as the social referent for the book. But the occurrence of the notion of "lesson" is undoubtedly a reference to education.

And those who know Gaines as a key black literary figure, the "lesson" is reminiscent of the long standing fight of the colored man for education. That fight comes as a rightful reaction to the will of the devotees of white supremacy to keep black citizens in a state of constant ignorance. Obviously, this is intended to justify their alleged status of inferior beings. By depriving his citizens of color of a good education, the South cheats them of the right to common humanity.

I.1 Perpetuating a Poor School System

Though Gaines first published his book in 1993, it follows a historicist reconstruction of life prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topika* 1954 court ruling. This legal act came to repeal the disposition of the so-called "separate but equal" doctrine which once authorized an unfair system that only provided a poor educational system for the colored. During that segregationist period, schools were run on a racist basis. As shown by the existence of the church run school by Grant Wiggins, the protagonist of this novel, formal education for the Black was no longer forbidden. Nonetheless, the persistence of notices that read "Whites only" came to remind the colored person of the racist distribution of space. Of course this distribution was unfair as it always provided the Black with the worst part.

The school run by Grant was a church school. It could have been a normal public school, but that is not really a problem. The Church, at large, has really been of a great help in providing education to the Black. In a contribution Monroe H. Little Jr.: declares that "the earliest efforts by whites to provide schooling to Africans were undertaken by the Anglican Church's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in the late seventeenth century." (W. Andrews 1997: 246-248) This was intended to teach Africans the religion of the New World they found themselves in, yet in the process, they were able to be literate. But, three centuries later, the goal set by the segregationists had not changed. Grant was just supposed to teach his students the rudiments of literacy and nothing more.

According to Monroe H. Little Jr.:

> The education of African Americans in the United States may be divided into four historical periods: (1) the period preceding the Civil War, (2) the period from the Civil War to 1895, (3) the period from 1895 to 1954, and (4) the period since 1954 (W. Andrews 1997: 246).

The third period in which the storyline of Gaines' book is set comes just after the Reconstruction during which the "federal government's short-lived Freedmen's Bureau, together with Northern missionaries and the newly emancipated freedpeople, established the first system of public schools in the Southern United States." (W. Andrews 1997: 246-248).

As long has the Freedmen's Bureau operated, the African Americans could enjoy a minimum of schooling. He was then on the verge of rising above that condition of the ignorant

individual who knew nothing else than to plough the field and whose prospects were bleak. Things seemed to have known an improvement. Yet, the truth of the matter is that the South, which had been forced to give some education to its citizen of color, did not relent in its efforts to keep them under control. Obviously, they could not have some great expectations about those students who attended the school where Grant taught reading, writing and arithmetic.

In this Southern part of the country where people depended much on agriculture, they needed cheap labor to allow things to run smoothly on their farms. Thus, the school year itself was tailored according to work in the fields, as the teacher underlines it: "This was my school. I was supposed to teach six months out of the year, but actually I taught only five and a half months, from late October to the middle of April, when children were needed in the field." (E. Gaines 1998: 34) In fact, the plantation system itself had not disappeared. Life still revolved around the Big House. Sugar cane was the main crop grown and the plight of the children of former slaves was not much different from that of their ancestors. Nothing should keep the children from going to the farm when it was necessary; not even the school.

As the school had only one building to house all the grades, there was only one teacher. "Only by assigning the upper grades students to teach the lower grades was it possible to reach all the students every day" (E. Gaines 1998: 34) Under normal circumstances, each grade was supposed to have the full attention of a teacher during a full day. But here, not only were the six month reduced to five and a half, but each class could only have the maximum attention of the teacher during a couple of hours in a day.

Moreover, this was a second-rate school which did not have the basic facilities. First, it was confined to the church building. Like the building it used which was owned by the church, the school had no belonging. There was no real desk for the teacher who was obliged to use a table. That table was the one used by the church for the collections and the Holy Sacrament during church services on Sunday.

The students themselves sat on the benches used by their parents during church services. Since they had no tables to write on, they either knelt down or used their lap as a base to do their assignment. In terms of materials, they were not better off. Despite the willingness of their parents who eagerly offered their help by bringing some wood for the heating whenever it was necessary, the school could not afford even enough chalk.

Grant complains about this state of utter destitution as follows: "I don't have all the books I need. In some classes, I have two children studying out of one book... I need more paper to write on, I need more chalk for the blackboards, I need more pencils, I even need a better heater... Many of the books I have to use are hand-me-downs from the white schools... And they have missing pages" (E. Gaines 1998: 57). The strange thing about this second-rate school is that it was not a mere religious school intended to offer a basic program of literacy to enable the students to read their Bible and to have a religious training.

The school belonged to the public school system in that part of the state. And as such, it was "honored" by the annual visit of Dr. Joseph, the superintendent who visited the colored schools once a year (E. Gaines 1998: 53). Dr. Joseph ought to be aware of the difficulties faced by Grant. As a supervisor, he was supposed to report these difficulties to the state. Assuming that

they had some higher expectations from the colored schools, they would ensure that the students have the necessary means. The fact that those schools received twice less visits from the superintendent shows that the state did not invest many resources.

Obviously, colored schools were a burden to the state as it was for Dr. Joseph. He declares that "all this running around 'enough to give a man a heart attack" (E. Gaines 1998: 58). They did not expect the colored to be smart. They rather preferred the colored to be ignorant and submissive. They preferred having students like Louis Washington Jr., a nonentity who knows nothing but black vernacular. He still responds by "Yazir" instead of "Yes Sir" though he is corrected hundreds of time. This student believes that America has ninety states instead of fifty. That is why despite his many grammatical mistakes and his incomprehensible discourse, the superintendent "seems quite satisfied" with his performance when the student is asked to pledge allegiance to the flag (E. Gaines 1998: 56).

Finally, the school system in the South obeys to a strictly segregationist policy that willfully perpetuates the vicious circle of ignorance in which its citizens of color are trapped. Then this attitude which holds up the black to ridicule for his illiteracy is rather cynical. The truth of the matter is that the school is the ideal place to promote an ideology which prevents the black race from participating in mainstream America.

I.2 Enslaving the Black Through a Racist Body of Doctrines

Education was the only avenue to participate in the modern life of the New World. It was useful for learning a trade or even standing before the court when one was accused of wrong doing as it was with Jefferson. Apart from the functional feature of education, it was a shameful thing to be an illiterate. In fact "Literacy... has been a central concept in modern Western thinking in determining who is considered most fully human and who is not" (W. Andrews 1997: 442-446). The discourse of the prosecution clearly describes Jefferson as not being human because he was a perfect illiterate.

Literary theorists like Edmond Cros argue that a given social discourse can be defined by a set of elements revolving around a given topic. In his book entitled *La sociocritique* we read this: "Le discours social...désigne essentiellement des concrétions sociodiscursives, des conglomérats de figures, d'images et de prédicats (…) autour d'un sujet thématique." (E. Cros 2003: 39). Likewise, the discourse of the Southern racists is replete with images that systematically deride citizens of color.

Jefferson is then likened to an animal and called a hog. Only a hog cannot read nor write. Only a hog cannot dial the phone because he has never learnt how to do it. Bearing the cruel marks of illiteracy and stupidity, Jefferson had remained a boy though he had reached the age of twenty-one. Yet, this young man whose human dignity is questioned had been to school. He was once a student of the church-school of Raphael Parish where Grant was now teaching. But as the system had planned it, his school years had ended up in bringing him down "to the level of beasts" (E. Gaines 1998: 62).

One argument that was often brought out by the racist system to justify slavery and later on the segregation of the black was to conclude that he was no human. As Grant declares about white people:"their forefathers said that we're only three-fifths human" (E. Gaines 1998: 192).

The easiest way to justify their hatred against the black was to declare that the later did not have a modicum of humanity in him. And the prosecutor as well as Jefferson's lawyer were still playing by that rule in declaring that he was an animal.

Three hundred years earlier, there had been much evidence to invalidate the racist theory. First of all, former slaves had shown through the rise of slave narratives that they surely participated fully in that common humanity. And if the racists of the South were to have their way, they would have not allowed the colored to have any education. Knowing how crucial the fire of education was, in that it could ensure the social and economic development of the black race, they resorted to some cynical means to prevent this from happening.

Maintaining a school system based on the unequal distribution of possibilities and prospects was the sure way for them to subdue the black. Actually, they did not expect those students taught by Grant to rise above basic literacy. The mindset of the system was well summarized as follows: "Teach those niggers how to print their names and to how to figure on their fingers" (E. Gaines 1998: 192). The average colored person remained an ignorant person who had no other choice than to plough the field. Consequently, they all had the same route: "...to the fields, to the small towns, to the cities – where they died". Most of them were killed or they killed someone and were "sent to the penitentiary." (E. Gaines 1998: 192)

Jefferson who had dropped out of school, and was now accused of a crime he did not commit, epitomizes the failure of the black man to rise above the stereotype of the nigger "with no dignity, no heart, no love for his people" (E. Gaines 1998: 191). Though, there was no real evidence of his guilt, he served as a scapegoat to confirm that the person of color was not as civilized as the white man.

A crime of the filthiest nature had been committed. Mr. Gropé had been murdered. Two other white men had also been killed. And it appeared from the description of the crime scene made by Jefferson's lawyer that his client could not have killed Mr. Gropé. But, the system has to hold him guilty, to prove its racist theory right. Only a black person, who was not really a man, could be insensitive enough to kill another human being, just to rob him of his belonging.

From the perspective of the prosecutor and the lawyer, Jefferson was an animal with no reasoning. He only obeyed to his instinct. While the prosecutor insisted in accusing him of being the murderer, his own lawyer, in trying to exonerate him from the crime, in a rather weird way, alleged that he could not had committed the crime for the mere reason that he was not intelligent enough to plan a crime. In short, like many of his compatriots, Jefferson was a misfit in this world of civilized people.

And the second-rate school system was put in place against the backdrop of this belief. Everything was geared toward bringing the colored down to the level of a beast. The behavior of Dr. Joseph, the school superintendant is a good illustration of the philosophy of the South as far as the education of his citizens of color is concerned. His inspection underlies the priorities of the system. To make sure that Grant was doing well, he had to ask a few questions to the students.

It could be inferred from the types of questions that came first that he was interested in having some loyal and submissive students. The students were to say their Bible verses and then pledge allegiance to the flag. Then, he went on with some questions about grammar, arithmetic

and geography. But, his thorough inspection of the hands, the mouths and the teeth reminded Grant of slavery. “I had read about slave masters who had done the same when purchasing horses and cattle.” (E. Gaines 1998: 56). Three hundred years later, things seemed to have remained the same. The system was not much interested in their intellectual development as it was in their physical aptitude.

To insist on this syllabus, Dr. Joseph went on to give a lecture on nutrition and bodily exercise. In other words, the students were to keep a good hygiene of the body to be fit for work in the field. They were needed more in the farm to pick cotton, gather potatoes and pull onion than they were to give evidence of their intellectual advancement. This is the reason why, despite being an intellectual, Grant could not earn the respect of the sheriff who refers to him as professor without meaning it.

And Grant is not supposed to act like the educated person he is, but rather like the nigger he is supposed to be. They even want him to make the same grammatical mistakes that the average illiterate person will make: “She doesn’t, huh?” Sam Guidry asked me. He emphasized “doesn’t” I was supposed to have said “don’t” ” (E. Gaines 1998: 48). No matter how hard they tried to improve their social conditions, black people remained trapped in the vicious circle of racial prejudice.

And this situation had created in them a strong feeling of frustration. This is the reason why Grant is so cynical and selfish when he is called upon by Jefferson’s godmother to help him become a man. First, he does not have confidence in himself, as the system has always made him to believe that he and his kinds cannot amount to anything. Then, he has resigned himself to losing faith in his black compatriots.

In conclusion, the South was trying to keep the colored in a state of ignorance. To justify his status of inferior being and deprive him of that common humanity, they had to put in place a poor school system based on the doctrine of “separate but equal”. The reason of this intellectual exclusion of the black was not to be found in his alleged natural inability to learn and be educated. This position rather illustrated a class struggle in which the whites of the South were determined to keep their socio-economic privileges. In his book, Gaines invites his people to a constructive action to break the vicious circle of ignorance in order to improve their condition. This

II. Breaking the Vicious Circle of Ignorance

A Lesson before Dying gives preeminence to the issue of education when we consider literacy as the main desired object. The book is not about unveiling the truth about the alleged crime of Jefferson. And the prominent members of the black community who sympathizes with him do not focus on the unfairness of his penalty. Their long experience with the South had taught them what to anticipate when a black man is accused of murdering a white man. What is at stake in this book is how to deal with the root cause: the irresponsibility of the elite.

If the black community was to reverse the trend of what seemed to be a vicious circle, two main conditions had to be fulfilled. First, like Grant, those who were considered as leaders were to abandon their resignation and cynicism. Then, education had to be redefined from the black perspective to meet with the challenges of ignorance, racial prejudice and human dignity.

II.1 Rising to the True Meaning of Leadership

We might not pry into the full meaning of the myth of Prometheus and the reasons that motivated the Olympus gods to refuse mankind the privilege of having and using fire. But, the commonly accepted idea is that Prometheus is an emblem of humanitarianism. He is considered as the friend of humanity for his goodwill. In robbing the fire of knowledge from the gods, he changed the unfortunate situation of man. In providing him with the fire of technology, he endowed man with a tool that would compensate his frail nature. Then, Prometheus is not just a hero by name[30] but, in standing for humanity, he remains a model for the human race who considers him as part of them.

The mythical story of Prometheus is imaginary. But, it has served as a strong basis for humanitarianism and individualism in the Western world. When the heroic figure is put in relation with the symbolism of the fire of knowledge, the myth can be applied to the situation of the black community. In their fight for better social perspectives, they have always been denied the necessary tool of knowledge acquired through education by a racist system. Hence the need of a strong leadership as underlined by Gaines in this book.

Actually, the servitude of the black race had taken a subtle form which was equally debasing. Those in the dark cave of ignorance needed the helping hand of a leader. Being raised in the community and knowing the plight of the others, he could now reach them. No other figure than a teacher could better break the chains and manacles of ignorance. This could be the reason why the narrator of this story is also a teacher and not a lawyer.

Unfortunately, the men in that trade do not see themselves as leaders. They are rather entangled in a feeling of frustration. Their discontentment is deeply rooted in the lack of recognition from the white community. They may have thought that higher education could earn them the respect of everybody and especially the consideration of white people. By completing their higher education, they had done more than just becoming literate. And since the ordinary colored person was ridiculed for his illiteracy, Matthew Antoine and Grant Wiggins, the teachers regretted the fact that they were still being considered as ordinary niggers.

In the case of Matthew Antoine whom Grant refers to as the big mulatto from Poulaya, his frustration had turned into self-hatred. First, he felt that the lightness of his skin color likened him to white people. If not for the few drops of African blood running through his veins, he could have been a happy member of the middle class. He was a self-conceited person who felt "superior to any man blacker..." (E. Gaines 1998: 65)

Obviously, Matthieu is a problematic character in that he is a misfit who does not fully belong to any of the opposing social groups. Being convinced of his superiority over other colored people, he had fully adopted what Zima calls the "sociolecte" or the collective language of the white supremacists (P. Zima 2011: 87). Yet, he could not freely mix with the real white people who displayed toward him the common disdain they had for any black person. His frustration came from the fact that being an educated "near white", he was still not free (E. Gaines 1998: 65). Then how could he stand for the black community he hated, when he believed that freedom was not possible in the South and that the only way out was flight?

[30] According to its Greek root, the word hero means a half-god or a titan.

Compared to Matthieu Antoine, who once had him as a student, Grant Wiggins teaches in the same school and displays the same cynicism. Yet, he is rather a complex character whose vision about the plight of the black evolves as the plot unfolds. At the beginning, he does not see himself as a leader. He seems to be contented with teaching "...what the white folks around here tell (him) to teach–reading, writing, and 'rthmetic" (E. Gaines 1998: 13). Actually, he hates teaching, but he has no other choice, since it is "the only thing an educated black man can do in the South..." (E. Gaines 1998: 191). There is nothing wrong with following a syllabus when you are a teacher. But, Grant is supposed to be knowledgeable enough to decide what his students need.

Yet, he complies with the racist system which requires from him a subservient attitude. In following the program of school authorities like Dr Joseph the superintendant, he willingly agrees with the Southern code which reduces black people to the level of two-year-olds. Instead of standing for his compatriots by reforming the school system, he rather contributes in perpetuating their ignorance. And, there is nothing to take credit for, when you collaborate with the oppressor to enslave your own people. Then, how could Grant have enough self-esteem to the point of coming to terms with the role of leader he was supposed to take on?

In contrast with Matthieu Antoine who is offered no possibility of redemption, for he dies in his frustration and cynicism; Grant is invited to be useful to his community. Even if he neglects his position as a teacher, the community holds him in high esteem. After all, his ascension to this position was a real exploit in itself. Despite, the pessimism of his teacher who had prophesied that most of his students including him would either die violently or be brought down to the level of beast, Grant had succeeded in going to university. He even managed to become a teacher.

Even the guilt he feels for accepting the requirements of the racist school system indicates that he possesses the human dignity that the average colored man has always been deprived of. When he is called upon by Aunt Lou and Miss Emma to pay visit to Jefferson, he knows that he will have to face the degrading demands of the racist rule. He will have to behave according to the etiquette of the South which stipulates that he acts like the nigger he was supposed to be. This is the reason why, out of egotism, he refuses at first.

Nonetheless, in the bottom of his heart lies a rebellion which will soon turn into a constructive awakening. Grant becomes conscious of the role he has to play in restoring his dignity to the black man, by redefining the purpose of education. He might not be a hero as he thinks. But, as a teacher, he can do more than teaching reading, writing, and 'rthmetic" if he is to reach his people.

II.2 Redefining Education

All this debate about the education of colored people arose from a desire which seemed inappropriate and unattainable in principle. Miss Emma, the godmother of Jefferson felt offended when the lawyer called him a hog. Then she came up with the idea of asking Grant to make him a man. Her desire might be likened to one of those little whims of old people. Some may think that she is hopeless owing to the trauma of the verdict. The sheriff and his friends may be so amused that they cast lots about how improbable the success of Grant was. And this controversy may

seem futile as Jefferson was bound to die. Yet, calling him a hog was the worse insult that typified the disdain for the entire black race. And, Miss Emma's request was intended to avenge that insult.

Jefferson who had not completed his education was an illiterate. And Grant could not reasonably reverse that situation in just a few months before the execution. Howbeit, Miss Emma insisted that she wanted a "man to go to that chair on his two feet" (E. Gaines 1998: 13). Then it would be good to know what she meant by making Jefferson to become a man. Of course a man is an adult male. Being an adult means being mature enough to reach some conclusions out of reasoning.

To become a man in this modern life hinged a lot upon education. And education has to be considered from the right perspective. *The Encyclopedia of Black Studies* defines education as "The process of acquiring knowledge and developing the mind and character through formal or informal learning" (M. Asante 2005: 225). So from the Afro-centric perspective of scholars like Molefi Asante, the editor of the above *Encyclopedia*, education is more than acquiring some knowledge in a school. A good education should teach the unity of humans and nature, social responsibility, the importance of character and the importance of humility. (M. Asante 2005: 226). And these are the things that can make a man.

In fact, education should in no case be limited to literacy as in the case of the school run by Grant. In limiting its program to basic literacy, black schools in the South were old-fashioned and they encouraged the backwardness of the race. As the storyline evolves in the 1940s, these were no longer the time of the slave narratives, where knowing how to read and write was an exploit. The book emphasizes the need of equal opportunities for all. Black people were not to be contended with the leftovers from white schools.

Conclusion

When all is said and done, it appears that, *A Lesson before Dying* takes us right back into the past of the nation to situate the responsibilities with regard to the current state of the black community. Its relative poverty, the violence of its neighborhoods and its huge prison population can be explained by the lack of sound education. While blaming the system at large, Gaines invites the black intelligentsia to turn from their cynicism and fulfill their duties. In doing that, he reminds us of the notion of the *Talented Tenth* as developed by WEB Dubois.

Though he may be criticized for advocating the rise of a black bourgeoisie, his philosophy remains useful as it underlies the social responsibility of the black elite. Having escaped from the cave of ignorance as in Plato's allegory, they were to return there to "remove the blanket of ignorance that has been plastered and replastered over those brains..." (E. Gaines 1998: 64).

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