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ERS 210

7 Dec 2018

Final Essay

In his novel *A Lesson Before Dying,* Ernest J. Gaines depicts a poor Cajun community in the Jim Crow south, where the narrator, Grant, is asked to get Jefferson, a young black man on death row, to agree to die “like a man.” Though Grant, the community school teacher, was unwilling to help Jefferson, or, more aptly, the community, in this way, there were several influences great enough to force him.

One of these influences, and perhaps the most effective, was Miss Emma, Jefferson’s godmother, and Tante Lou, Grant’s aunt. Grant was a very cynical character and believed that there was little to no hope of a positive change in the community, entangled as it was in a Jim Crow racial power structure. But when Jefferson was called a “hog” by his own lawyer and subsequently sentenced to death, Miss Emma went to Tante Lou to get Grant’s help. Because Grant was the community teacher, he was expected to be a driving force of progress in the community. Though Grant didn’t believe that he could do Jefferson or the community any good by giving him pride before he died, saying that Jefferson was “already dead” (14), he was bullied by his aunt into regular meetings with Jefferson. Miss Emma is confident in Grant’s ability to instill pride in Jefferson because, as she tells him, “You the teacher.” Jefferson, Miss Emma believed, could play a role of change in the community and could help enact change, and she expected him to fulfill this position. Because of her belief in his role in the community, it can be deduced how their position in their society influenced the need for Jefferson to go to his death “on his own two feet.” Grant felt trapped in their stagnant status and had no hope for his students escaping their fates. In Miss Emma’s and Tante Lou’s eyes, Jefferson dying with dignity was the first step of changing the power structure by giving young black men and women alike hope. In the end, Grant was able to convince Jefferson to sacrifice his self-interest, his hopeless lack of self-worth, for the good of the community and of Miss Emma.

Similarly to Grant, Reverend Ambrose was put into a community leadership role by being the sole preacher. He was expected to have the right things to say, go to visit the sick, to visit and advise Jefferson, and to ultimately be one of the few to stand with Jefferson during his execution. Grant proved to be a mistrustful and condescending character in some situations. Grant showed disdain for Reverend Ambrose because of his uneducated status and because of his general distrust for the hope that Rev. Ambrose tries to teach in the form of religion (heaven in particular). Rev. Ambrose proved, however, that one couldn’t get all important lessons in formal education, asking Grant, when Grant mentioned his college education, “But what did you learn?” To Reverend Ambrose, because Grant didn’t use his education to improve the lives of the children in the community, he was not a fully educated individual. Despite his lack of education and his use of lies to teach his doctrine, Reverend Ambrose is able to fulfill his grave task regarding Jefferson’s death and in the general community, in being the sole religious leader and beacon of hope and strength through God.

I’m a little ashamed to admit that I wasn’t really aware of the everyday racism that a lot of people face. While I was a little skeptical of the degree of truth in some of the described situations, like in *Citizen* and in “I was Cyberbullied for Being a Black Feminist,” because I felt that there was some exaggeration happening, this course has nonetheless been eye-opening. I knew almost nothing about what it was like for Black people in the south when the Jim Crow laws were in effect, and, though I knew it wasn’t pretty or even bearable at times, I never imagined that the prejudice was so all-encompassing. *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Invisible Man* were particularly striking in that regard.

Even though I disagreed with a good portion of what Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote about in his book, I can accept the fact that I will likely never have that perspective that will allow me to really understand what he’s saying. Honestly, I feel like a bit of it flew over my head (he can claim to write in simple language, but anyone can see that he doesn’t). Despite my opinion about it, I thought that it was incredibly valuable to read, and it is why I wanted to do my research paper on the Black Panther Party. I had thought that it was strange for so many people to support the Party because I’d always been taught that it was a violent militant group. I didn’t know until I was researching that their militant policies were only half of the activism they participated in. I would have loved to write a much longer paper on the Black Panther Party; I don’t know if it was obvious, but I had to chop a giant portion of my planned content out because I was going way too far above the word limit (as it was, I was still above it). The contrast between the New Black Panther Party and the original Party was particularly striking; it seems like all of my previous knowledge on the BPP was based on the new Party rather than the old one, by how overlooked the “survival programs” are.

All the insights gained from the texts that we read can be used outside of the class. Reading about different cultures and expanding your knowledge about other perspectives is absolutely vital in combating prejudice in our everyday lives. Understanding how stereotypes and unconscious prejudice affects our judgment can help in all sorts of different situations, like ethical research practices, depicting characters as humans rather than objects in literature and other art, lawmaking, establishing ethical business practices, analyzing how certain situations (e.g., pollution) affect individual groups of people differently, and general everyday interactions. All of those things can be affected by prejudice, and all can cause negative effects on other people. In my critical theory class, we discussed Richard Rorty, who believed that our actions should aim to create the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people, and that cruelty is the worst thing a person can do. Learning about other perspectives through literature is, I believe, one way to give ourselves the tools to do just that.