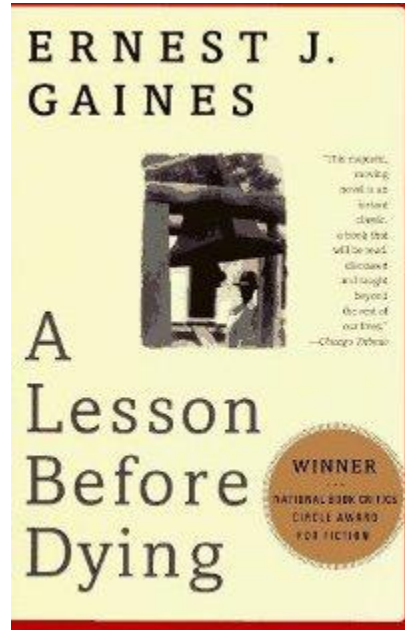


**Ineptitude and Value for Community in Ernest J. Gaines’
*A Lesson Before Dying***

M. Rajalakshmi, M.A., B.Ed. and R. Lissy, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed., (Ph.D.)



Abstract

Gaines presents a paradoxical view of religion that positions personalism as both an indictment on and antidote for the Church’s ignorance of tangible injustices. Because personalism connects the doctrine of inherent human dignity to action, the failure of Gaines’s preachers to act in accordance to their community’s vision for social action adds to their impotence and informs the critique of the Church as being divorced from human suffering. The preachers’ ineptitude, however, points to the reality of a solution, alluding to the possibility of reconciling Christianity with social action if the Church seeks to relieve both the physical and spiritual suffering of the oppressed much like the Catholic Worker Movement. At its most effective, personalism, like that of the Catholic Worker Movement, links organized Christianity with social action and reveals that religion does not have to be incompatible with progress.

Key words: Paradoxical view, Personalism, Human dignity, Social action.

Introduction: Ernest Gaines



Courtesy: www.pbs.org

Growing on a plantation, Gaines found his childhood experiences central to the formation of his identity as a man and later as a writer. Although he left Louisiana to pursue an education in California, Gaines discovered amazing peace in the works of literature he studied: the stories of his people. Perhaps atoning for this lack of representation, his fiction centres on the “people back home” and reflects upon his responsibility to tell their stories. Gaines fills his oeuvre with representations of the ordinary, of the human, depicting the struggles facing his fictional communities. Being steeped in the culture of the South, he also views organized religion as an inevitable presence in any community, and his exploration of religion occurs in the context of tight-knit communities. Though attending a Baptist church and a Catholic school as a child, Gaines takes a paradoxical approach to organized religion, claiming that “not any of them are goanna really cure things” while asserting that believing in a force “greater than what you are” is necessary I for survival. This view of religion mirrors a central tension in his novels: reconciling the value for community and the importance of social change with the established Church.

Personhood, Community, and Ernest J. Gaines

Personalist theology, along with Gaines’s fiction, resists the idea of isolation while highlighting the importance of communal good, criticizing social and religious institutions that fail to uphold the value of human dignity and community. In “Personalism and Traditional African Thought,” Burrow argues that “the church exists for the person and not the other way

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around” and those churches should be judged and evaluated on the extent to which they meet the needs of the community. Representing their churches, the preachers in Gaines’s novels struggle to uphold this vision for communal action as they simultaneously affirm the personalist value for community, yet differ in their views on appropriate social action. Gaines’s emphasis on community is consistent with the tenets of personalism, illuminating his critique on the insufficiency of the institutional Church because of its lack of response to injustice. While providing a lens with which to critique the Church, the presence of personalism in Gaines’s novels also affirms the value of Christian institutions in the life of a community, exposing the tensions between reconciling faith and action.

Centres around the Importance of Community - Reverend Moses Ambrose

Much of Gaines’s fiction centres on the importance of community. Reverend Moses Ambrose of *A Lesson before Dying* serves as a representation of the Church’s role in the community. At the beginning of the novel, he sits with Miss Emma Jefferson’s godmother as she listens to the public defender say that her godson is no better than a mere animals.

Reverend Ambrose is there as the judge sentences Jefferson to death, is there in his prison cell at Miss Emma’s request, and is there at the electric chair. His devotion to Miss Emma mirrors personalism’s emphasis on community and demonstrates one of the central aims of the Church to serve the needs of a community. Despite Ambrose’s presence throughout the novel, Grant Wiggins the young, cynical teacher views the preacher as a relic of an outdated system of Christianity that has little effect on the lives of his people.

While Grant views Reverend Ambrose as impotent and ineffectual, this indictment adds another layer of complexity to the preacher’s character. Both Reverend Ambrose and Grant have different conceptions of social action; the preacher endeavouring to convert Jefferson and the teacher seeking to help Jefferson realize his humanity. In opposing Grant’s vision for progress, the preacher appears antagonistic toward the concerns of the younger black community, yet he still provides support for Miss Emma and Tanta Lou, revealing the paradoxes in his embodiment of personalism.

Although personalism affirms the value of social action, the division between Reverend Ambrose and Grant reflects the tensions inherent in reconciling faith with action, as the interplay of his impotence and humanness manifests itself in his deviation from Grant's definition of social action, yet one can see as Lloyd points out, "his devotion to the community."

Love and Responsibility

The lawyer uses dehumanizing language to describe Jefferson, but his charges also reflect white culture's erroneous perceptions of the black community. Here, Jefferson's public defender brings several stereotypes to the surface, perpetuating beliefs in biological and intellectual inferiority, beliefs that plague Gaines's community. However, the defense attorney's words contradict Catholic personalism's conception of personhood.

In *Love and Responsibility*, Pope John Paul II asserts the dignity of all people based on man's creation in God's image. Accordingly, man's possession of both a rational nature and a "specific inner self" separates him from the rest of creation, including animals. By contrast, the public defender's words are antithetical to Catholic personalism's definition of a person, the lies Reverend Ambrose must counter throughout the novel as he helps Jefferson realize that he is a person with a soul.

In spite of the overt racism of these charges against Jefferson's personhood, the defense attorney draws apt conclusions about the communal nature of morality, which upholds the personalist view of ethics and action. Addressing those gathered in the courtroom, he claims that "we must live with our own conscience". It is important to note that this collective conscience applies to both the jurors and the listeners, illustrating the moral dimension of the jury's decision to execute the innocent Jefferson as a crime against his personhood. To Borden Parker Bowne, one of the first personalists in the American academy, morality and community are inseparable. Bishop Francis J. McConnell summarizes Bowne's conception of ethics and morality, noting that Bowne defines morality as an ethical system that seeks to preserve the good of both individuals and communities. As a result, any act that threatens this sense of personhood and communal good is immoral. While the defense attorney's charges against Jefferson undercut the personalist aim of upholding individual dignity, his statements about morality and the collective conscience

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ironically support Browne's conception of morality and community. By using the collective “we,” Jefferson’s defense attorney unwittingly implicates himself for his failure to embody personalist ethics through emphasizing the relationship between the morality and a community of persons. Though this scene only occupies a small space in the novel, Jefferson’s trial highlights the importance of community and reveals the relationship between ethical action and communities' central tenets of personalism.

Devotion to His Community

Moreover, Reverend Ambrose’s presence at the trial reflects his devotion to his community as he supports Miss Emma, here embodying Catholic personalism’s doctrine of participation. Because Grant narrates the events of the trial, the preacher does not appear until the end of this account, seemingly minimizing his role in the community. However, his presence at the trial shows his loyalty to and value for his church members, as he remains seated by Miss Emma for emotional and spiritual support. Serving as a representative of the Church, Reverend Ambrose is not removed from Miss Emma or Jefferson’s suffering; instead, he actively participates in the life of his community, illuminating a key component of Pope John Paul II’s personalism. In “The Person: Subject and Community,” John Paul II affirms that all human beings exist in the context of community. Because human existence cannot be separated from community, he defines participation as a characteristic of personhood and the manifestation of personalism: “To participate in the humanity of another human being means to be vitally related to the other as a particular human being, and not just related to what makes the other a human being.

Conclusion

This is ultimately the basis for the whole distinctive character of the evangelical concept of neighbour. Through standing with Miss Emma at Jefferson’s trial, Reverend Ambrose shows his willingness to actively participate in his community, revealing his vision for social action. Here, he does not attempt to console Miss Emma with abstract assurances of Divine comfort but is simply there. Offering a positive assessment of Reverend Ambrose’s character, critic William R. Nash argues that the preacher, in contrast to some of Gaines’s other ministers, reflects the possibility for cooperation between the Church and the community. Even in the opening chapters

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of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Reverend Ambrose's presence expresses his desire to support the suffering members of the community like Miss Emma, upholding the personalist value of community and reflecting his definition of social action.

As the novel progresses and Miss Emma petitions Henri Pichot to allow Jefferson to have visitors, her commentary on Reverend Ambrose complicates the Church's role in the novel, and she seems to advocate a view of Christianity that is incompatible with daily living in the community, introducing the division between the Church and social action. Miss Emma asks Pichot to persuade Sheriff Guidry to give her and Grant permission to visit Jefferson in his cell. Pichot tells the older woman to be content with Reverend Ambrose's visits "and keep it at that" a request that Miss Emma refuses. Responding to Pichot's request, Miss Emma introduces the dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical, explaining, "Yes, sir, I'm concerned for his soul, Mr. Henri I'm concerned for his soul. But I want him to be a man, too, when he go to that chair". On the surface, Miss Emma's dual concerns show a distinction between the soul and the man, and her vision for social action requires more than Jefferson's spiritual salvation as she longs for her godson to view himself as a human being.

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