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Sartre's Existentialism for Grant and Jefferson's Educational Commitment in Ernest J. Gaines's Novel: *A Lesson Before Dying*

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ABSTRACT

Racism and Injustice have put Jefferson, a poor young black man, into an electrocution for murder and burglary that he has never done. As a coloured, he cannot do anything than accept the defense attorney verdict – white American Supreme Court's desegregation – who addresses him as a “hog.” It leaves an inferior feeling that he is nothing but a hog. Comparing him to a hog attracts Miss Emma's protest that she would like him walking to the electric chair as a human. Therefore, to get Jefferson understands that he is worth a man, she asks Grant Wiggins – an educated black teacher to educate him so he could die a man. In fact, the biggest challenge Grant faces when he looks at Jefferson is his feeling of looking at himself as a man experiencing the same type of racism and discrimination at the oppressive white community. Whereas, educating Jefferson to be a man is difficult as he has to make himself confident with his existence before determining ways of assuring Jefferson as an existing man who will walk to the electric chair on two feet, not a hog. Educating is underpinning people to have great control over lives and surroundings. Its importance deals with functioning the knowledge significant to empower. This is convincing that Jefferson should be educated so that he will not degrade himself as coloured because of his inability to say even a word to defend himself. Using the existentialism philosophy, Grant and Jefferson's educational commitment in *A Lesson Before Dying* is discussed based on five themes of Sartre's existentialism. It reveals that Grant does not get any positive response once he starts teaching. Gradually, Jefferson speaks to him after being attracted by his personal feelings. Grant's ultimate achievement is when he can make Jefferson writes a diary, to portray some individual matters. What Grant has accomplished is his ability to link the themes, relevant to the philosophy of education. Grant succeeds in transforming Jefferson as a man who has dignity.

INTRODUCTION

A Lesson Before Dying is an African-American novel narrated by the protagonist Grant Wiggins, an educated black man working as a school teacher in Bayonne in the 1940s. Like the common literary theme of that era, Ernest J. Gaines explores the issue of discrimination between whites and blacks before the Law of Civil Rights is passed. In that

period of segregation, black communities live a hard life. Slavery was abolished in 1833, yet it still affects the way people live, how the whites see and treat the blacks, vice versa. Poverty and injustice have become the problems faced by blacks during that era. In this novel, Gaines takes his readers back to a time when racial segregation is both legal

and widespread in the South, a time when black people can hardly hope for consideration of their right, much less seek justice in the court of law. Some black communities can be interconnected to the whites despite the fact that they work as labors in the plantation or as the caregivers at the houses of the whites. Indeed, racism and discrimination are in contrast to the philosophy of existentialism, which centers in a person. It is a person's pursuit of identity (Flynn, 2006). Moreover, Jean-Paul Sartre claims that Existentialism is a humanism (Sartre, 2007). In this novel, Grant, who is educated and understands the unfortunate situation around him, attempts to manage the racism aside his most challenge to manage his own mind before redefining Jefferson's identity as a man.

All the conflicts start from the courtroom when the defense attorney labels Jefferson with "hog." This causes Jefferson to feel bad as an uneducated black young man, and he cannot do anything against the verdict of death sentence by virtue of the fact that he is found alive with a lot of money on his hands, among three bleeding dead men.

"Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair;" (Gaines, 1994:4) says the defense attorney by which he has dehumanized Jefferson by comparing him with a hog. As a human being, he does not get any opportunity to defend himself. As a matter of fact, all white lawyers do not appreciate his existence as a human being. Flynn (2006) affirms five themes of Sartre's existentialism as 1)existence precedes essence, 2) time is of the essence, 3)humanism, 4)freedom/responsibility, and 5)ethical considerations are paramount. Of those five, it is against humanism if there is no opportunity for an individual to show his/her true identity. Auger (1995) states that black men face the challenge of being denied to show their integrity and self-esteem. This situation attracts Miss Emma – Jefferson's godmother – and Tante Lou to educate him so that he will never consider himself a hog before the electrocution. Moreover, the two women ask Grant Wiggins to educate Jefferson not to feel down because he is worth a man.

Dealing with education, the existentialists believe that reality is found in the experience. Therefore, the way people see themselves and the meaning they see themselves they have in their lives is

influenced by experience (Fuller, 2018). It is uneasy for Grant to accept the request of educating Jefferson. Educating means sharing commitments (Makaiau & Miller, 2008) that he has to devote his life as a teacher. Instead, he has opportunities to leave Bayonne because of his education and has granted himself more superior than Jefferson and any other blacks in that area.

According to Webber (2018), Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre characterize existentialism as a moral philosophy that people should regard freedom at the core of human existence as an inherent value and the basis of all other values. Subsequently, Grant tries to make himself well-recognized for his education by searching for his existence regardless of his responsibility to contribute to the black society with his education. He has been found humiliating his students of the same race. According to Brown (2018), racism is known as the implementation of discriminatory practices based on race-based ascriptions, often varies both temporally or spatially. Learning that Grant has been exposed to a different lifestyle, he is aware of opportunities that his race has denied him. Therefore, he is much likely than Jefferson to strike at the oppressive white community determined to keep him in his place.

By his choice of educating Jefferson, he has to commit a teaching betterment. He has to bear in mind that educating requires teaching what is worth knowing and actions that are morally acceptable (Moore, 2010). This is the most difficult self-conflict, doubting that his existence does not guarantee that he can teach Jefferson to exist as a man. Auger (1995) finds that Grant's own situation is similar to Jefferson's, in that he and Jefferson are experiencing a serious change in their own self-perception.

At the moment when Grant is not sure of his ability to educate Jefferson about life, his girlfriend, Vivian, takes an important role in persuading him to take the decision. He is still not sure of educating Jefferson as his ambition of leaving Bayonne for more prospective life is still there in his mind. He is pessimistic towards Jefferson's response since his first coming to the prison. He keeps insisting that he is a hog, acting like a hog, and eating on his knees just like that animal. Also, when Grant asks him,

“Are you trying to hurt me, Jefferson?”

“Are you trying to make me feel guilty for your being here?”

“You don’t want me to come back here anymore?”

“His expression remained the same—*cynical, defiant, painful*,” (Gaines, 1994: 79).

For being threatened that way, he thinks about telling lies to Miss Emma that everything is okay with Jefferson. However, his religious girlfriend assures him that he can manage it because he loves everyone, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, Jefferson, and all people in Bayonne but the place. Apparently, Grant takes Vivian’s suggestion more seriously and considers Reverend Ambrose’s distrust of his existence as a teacher of not teaching Jefferson’s soul. Even if Grant is in an “existential dilemma” (Shoba, 2018) as he cannot consider himself as a true believer of Christian God, there are Miss Emma and Tante Lou who always say that Grant can handle it. Having the confidence that he can act to be a meaningful person like Sartre’s slogan that existence precedes essence (Webber, 2018), Grant commits to himself to educate Jefferson even if he cannot organize all enviable inputs of teaching like knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Moore, 2010), but will be responsible to what he has chosen.

Existence Precedes Essence

Sartre argues that people can prove their essence by choosing what to act for giving meaning to their lives in certain circumstances (Flynn, 2006). Grant struggles to educate Jefferson carefully in order to make Jefferson understand the objective of his teaching about life, human essence, that everyone’s achievement is not innate but through the process (Webber, 2018).

When he starts teaching Jefferson, Grant asks Paul Bonin – the deputy – about Jefferson’s daily activities. Paul is such a good man who becomes close to Grant. He tells every detail of Jefferson’s activities, and it makes Grant appreciate his job at the prison and is comfortable to talk to the man. That gives Grant the idea to have a small talk with Jefferson during his first teaching. Nonetheless, Jefferson still confronts Grant’s coming. He argues that there is nothing to talk about because everything has been clear that he is waiting for the time to die – different from Grant, who can hope of

a life after getting out of the cell.

“I don’t know when I’m going to die, Jefferson. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next

week, maybe today. That’s why I try to live as well as I can every day and not hurt people. Especially people who love me, people who have done so much for me, people who have sacrificed for me. I don’t want to hurt those people. I want to help those people as much as I can,” (Gaines, 1994: 124).

The quotation explains that Grant believes what he is doing as a choice that he does not exactly know what will happen in the future. He states that he appreciates what people do to him, and he always wants to make them around by loving and caring. That is the reason why he has never known the fact that he is raised as a colour.

“I never asked to be born.” “Neither did I,” I said. “But here I am. And I’m trying to make the best of it,” (Gaines, 1994: 124).

Grant’s teaching about his existence has made Jefferson eager to see reality. When he has a feeling that Grant is a good man who is always optimistic about seeing the future, he is motivated to enjoy his life until the electrocution. He tells Grant that

“I’m go’n wait,”

“I’m go’n wait. I want a whole gallon. Eat it with a pot spoon. Every bit of it—with a pot spoon,” (Gaines, 1994: 166).

Jefferson has been looking forward to the day that he has to leave Bayonne and all the people there. He has known that people have been attentive to him during the time he is in prison. He is just known that children of Bayonne ask Grant to take foods for him, and for that, he asks Grant to tell the children how thankful he is for that attention.

“Tell—tell the children thank you for the pecans,” he stammered. (Gaines, 1994: 183).

This is the achievement that both Grant and Jefferson can present. Grant wants to cry because of his success that Jefferson has been transformed to be a real man. Yet, Jefferson needs to be prompted again that he is a real man, not a hog, as he always spells the word out to Grant.

“You have the chance to be bigger than anyone who has ever lived on that plantation or come

from this little town. You can do it if you try,” (Gaines, 1994: 189).

Sartre (2007) states that people cannot judge others since for any choice someone takes, there is a possibility that other people would dislike it. He adds that man is always the same, facing a situation that is always changing, and a choice is always an option in that situation.

Time is of the Essence

Humans are fundamentally time-bound beings (Webber, 2018). It motivates people to act in indefinite time – not yet -, in the past, and at present to show certain value. Time flies, and someone can change. After getting along for some moments, Jefferson learns that things might change, not to mention himself.

“Yes, it’s a nice day,” I said. “No clouds anywhere. Just blue.”

“You think it’s go’n be like that that day?” he asked, (Gaines, 1994: 166).

Jefferson is thinking about the value of that day and curious about what is going to happen when the execution time comes. Besides, he is grasping the events that he has never mentioned to others, except Grant.

“The kind of day I want?” he said.

“The kind of day I want? I never got nothing I wanted in my whole life.

Now I’m go’n get a whole day?” (Gaines, 1994: 166).

Reviewing the time is the essence of human life, Friday becomes the day that Grant and Jefferson are waiting for. Throughout the events of educating Jefferson, Friday is a valuable time that they hope to come soon for talking to one another. On the same day, Paul is coming to Jefferson’s cell, taking him a radio to listen to *Randy’s Record Shop*.

Humanism

Existentialism focuses on human individual’s pursuit of identity. Sartre (2007) affirms that people always see the moral dilemma, like when they have to against or support slavery. That dilemma relates to humanism as the value of different choices always affects others. To educate Jefferson, he has to convince him to search for identity. By education,

Jefferson should be a human being and the pursuit of education as a way of becoming as human as possible, both as an individual and as a member of society (Zovko & Dillon, 2018). For that important rationale, Grant has to tell Jefferson someone that he might loathe, like Vivian, becomes an important person that guides him to come and see Jefferson rather than going out of Bayonne to get more opportunities.

“If I didn’t have Vivian, I wouldn’t be in this damn hole. Because I know damn well I’m not doing any good, for you or for any of the others. Do you hear what I’m saying to you? Do you?” (Gaines, 1994: 125).

Listening to that statement, Jefferson is touched. It is one of the pieces of evidence that Grant has achieved his objective of transforming Jefferson.

“I saw that grin slowly fade as he lowered his eyes toward the floor. When he

looked up again, I saw tears in those big reddened eyes,” (Gaines, 1994: 125).

As a human being, he expresses his abstract continuity and the sense of discontinuous impression (Sartre, 2007) – a feeling. Jefferson has such a feeling as his response to a situation that he suddenly encounters. As his personality develops, he can remember different things in different situations. He can forget his hunger for food – ice cream – but he cannot forget the time when he is arrested for being a burglar and murderer. Grant finds that,

“He had forgotten about the ice cream now. He remembered the day he was supposed to go into the swamp with Gable but instead had ended up with Brother and Bear at the liquor store,” (Gaines, 1994: 167).

Even, Grant encourages him to remember all his experiences in his life by bringing radio for him to listen for enjoyment – feeling the other sense of human life.

“Let me bring you a little radio. You can have music all the time. You can listen to Randy’s Record Shop late at night,” (Gaines, 1994: 167).

All that Grant wants to build is confidence that Jefferson has choices in his life, has the right to choose what he likes to do and what he wants to be.

“I want you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To them, you’re nothing but another nigger—no dignity, no heart, no love for your people,” (Gaines, 1994: 188).

This statement is to persuade Jefferson that he can be a real man. Sartre (2007) argues that man is always beyond himself that man is realized, and, on the other hand, it is in achieving transcendent aims that he is able to exist.

Freedom/Responsibility

Existentialism is a philosophy of freedom (Sartre, 2007). It is based on the fact that people can stand back from their lives and focus on what they have been doing. In this sense, people are always superior to they are. They are just as responsible as they are free. Webber (2018) clarifies that human freedom is the responsibility of each individual for his/her situation.

Before teaching Jefferson about freedom, Grant introduces a concept of responsibility, he says it is an obligation.

“Obligation?” I said. “Do you know what ‘obligation’ means?”

He didn’t answer. But he kept looking at me.

“No matter how bad off we are,” I said,

“we still owe something. You owe something, Jefferson. Not to me. Surely not to that sheriff out there. But to your godmother. You must show her some understanding, some kind of love,” (Gaines, 1994: 135).

Grant ensures Jefferson it is his responsibility to love Miss Emma because she cares for him. Likewise, he has to make her proud of him. Furthermore, a treatment to make Jefferson gain authority on himself, Grant offers him to write a diary. It provides freedom for Jefferson to express his different feelings by writing. Grant notices the most important part of his diary depicts Jefferson’s expressions of what he has recently struggled to get substantial freedom as a human being.

“If I ain’t nothing but a hog, how come they just don’t knock me in the head like a hog? Starb me like a hog? More erasing, then: Man walk on two feet; hogs on four hoofs,” (Gaines, 1994: 268).

It is nearly the execution that his writing contains an acknowledgment that he is a man and will be the same when he walks to the electric chair. Freedom is the foundation of all values (Flynn, 2006; Kenny, 2007; Webber, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

It is a philosophical theory that emphasizes the life of a person as a free agent who, by acts of will, decides his own creation (Flynn, 2006). Webber (2018) argues that ethical considerations are the foundations of other values in existentialism.

“And like Reverend Ambrose say, then I’ll have to give up this old earth. But ain’t that where I’m going, Mr. Wiggins, back in the earth?” (Gaines, 1994: 223).

Jefferson is free to do what he likes to do. He takes that basic idea from Reverend Ambrose, but as he knows he is a man, he chooses what to do based on ethical considerations.

DISCUSSION

How Grant educates Jefferson is conditioned by his mutilated emotion of being taught by his childhood teacher Matthew Antoine who at the end of his life claims that education brings no change. He wants to treat Jefferson differently. This good side proves Grant’s commitment to educate Jefferson in his own way. Philosophically, Burbules (2018) believes that Plato’s theory about education gives a wide range of ideas in-built potential and meritocracy. Gradually, Jefferson accepts Grant, then both of these two men collaborate in finding their existence in life. Getting through the process of finding Jefferson’s identity, Grant has to get his attention including how to get him saying even a word. As an example, Grant reminds him of his life outside the prison. It proves that he starts to say words about his childhood experience to his apprehension time. Gaines exposes Grant’s fate is inevitably bound to Jefferson’s. This is in line with Sartre’s theory of humanism in which to reach Jefferson’s pursuit of identity, Grant finds his own ways to educate Jefferson and fortunately it works.

Along the journey of Jefferson’s attempts to get his identity, he determines how to appreciate others. Once he thanks Grant for the pecans, apologizes for his lewd remarks about Vivian, gives Grant a sweet potato, and begins writing his

diary, he has changed. Ethically, he knows how to appreciate others as well as how to confess his mistake. It means that Grant's teaching through existentialism has been internalized. Makaiiau & Miller (2008) argued that the result of teaching is when students internalize the skills and strategies needed to carry out a thorough analysis of their lives. Therefore, approaching his execution time, Jefferson has found his happiness, realized that he is a man and has been braver than ever.

Different from the common heroes who manage to gain complete freedom, Grant is a "hero" for Jefferson by teacher – student relationship. Grant regards his position is a responsibility that he has to pay back for his previous students' humiliation. As a state of mind, Grant does not take responsibility that relates to dedication (Connolly, James, & Fertig, 2019) as a burden and a weight to carry. Otherwise, Grant take it as a journey that he has to get through with Jefferson as his student. This relationship is parallel with Sartre's explanation about interpersonal relations – being – for others (Flynn, 2006). Therefore, Grant and Jefferson are not blood relatives, they are connected through their common experiences as black males. They apply the social relations that share of Sartre's force of circumstances as both of the men used to live at the same place – Bayonne.

Grant and Jefferson's dedication is a collection of educational principles that focus on the origin or essence of human beings but rather one their existence. The existentialist thinkers reject the idea that every man owns an essence or a specific role in life as every man is born free. For every problem a man faces, there is no answer until he chooses what to do as he is responsible for what he does. Therefore, the first consequence of existentialism is that it places every man in control of himself

as he is, and places all blame for his life on his shoulders. And when it is considered that man is responsible for himself, it does not mean that he is responsible for his own identity alone, but that he is responsible for all people (Sartre, 2007). Grant has proven it after being prisoned by himself for his confusion to act as an educated black man. Learning from the quality of his life, he should meet his destiny not to leave Bayonne but stay for his responsibility to the people. He has reached his identity for his own essence as a result of his choice and his commitment to pursuing the significant task of turning Jefferson before facing his death as a man. This is Grant's pride in accomplishing his task. The end of the novel is full of notes as Grant's dream of a future where segregation does not exist.

CONCLUSION

It is a bit of irony that Jefferson learns about how to live a life as a man during his dying days as he starts to discover more about his identity and his pride through education under the guidance of Grant. This story pinpoints the importance of education to build the integrity and the confidence of the people of color during the segregation era. Through proper education, people of the oppressed groups could be able to develop their betterment to free themselves. Having the self-awareness of pride, dignity, and responsibility, the oppressed would learn that they are the same human beings that also have choices in life. Therefore, they are free to decide what they want to do and what they want to be.

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