

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RACIAL SEGREGATION IN ERNEST JAMES GAINES'S A LESSON BEFORE DYING

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ABSTRACT

In Ernest James Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, racial segregation between Blacks and Whites in the United States is more evident in the field of education and in prisons where schools, libraries, and jail cells are segregated because of white Americans' opposition to their black peers' conception of racial mixing extolled by Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, to quote only two. This racial segregation shows not only the inferior position occupied by Blacks before their white fellows, but also the kind of lifestyle they have to live daily on the American soil. For, the novel reads that while white schools are well built and crammed with good pedagogical materials and teachers who teach all along the school period, black ones are, however, unfashionable with teachers deprived of good teaching materials and whose teaching period is very often shortened for the simple reason that their learners have to go and work for Whites' interests on plantations. In prisons, for example, while white prisoners are fed daily and put into jail cells with seats and toilet papers, black prisoners find theirs deprived of these important artifacts.

Key Words: The United States, Blacks, Whites, Racial segregation, Field of education, Prisons.

1. INTRODUCTION

I start this exploration on Ernest James Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* by clarifying the term "segregation" which may seem somehow obscure to some readers. It is viewed as the practice of keeping racial groups separate. For, one knows that after slavery was made illegal by the thirteenth Amendment, state and local laws known as the Jim Crow Laws kept the black and white populations separate. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, while white characters enjoy the full fruition of the American democracy thanks to their white skin color, black characters find themselves segregated for the simple reason that they are black. Published in 1993, Ernest James Gaines's narrative tells of its protagonist Jefferson, a black male character who is jailed and killed after being accused of murder in Louisiana for being present at the place of murder.

My choice of Ernest James Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* for this paper is mainly linked to black Americans' experience of racial segregation in the United States. Romulus Linney who first explored it, states that "*to instruct students to stand up to segregation, racism and hatred in A Lesson Before Dying, teachers can instill their students with the dignity others have robbed from them*".¹ In almost the same way Harper Lee argues that "*in A Lesson Before Dying, black characters are segregated even in jail cells because of their blackness*".² One understands that what is portrayed in Gaines's novel is black characters' experience of their white peers' injustice against them due to their black skin color. This injustice which is far from being the author's invention is also raised by Massala and Evayoulou who, after exploring John Oliver Killens's *And*

Then We Heard the Thunder, discover Blacks' loss of interest in fighting alongside with Whites during the Second World War because of the latter's racist system against them:

When one country or a nation is at war against another, the first thing that warriors have in mind is to consider their opponents as their enemies, and the greatest urge that everybody should have is to fight and win the ones they are fighting. But what we find depicted here is that black soldiers do not have this state of mind, because they do not engage in war in order to fight for the liberation of the country, but because they are obliged to engage in, and the fact of shooting at people who have done nothing to them is shocking them most of the time. That is why they do not have any motivation or interest to fight the war (Massala & Evayoulou: 2013, 82-83).

From this view, one understands that *A Lesson Before Dying* is about black Americans' experience of racism on the American soil. This sorrowful experience urges me to concentrate on the answer to the following question: To what extent is Ernest James Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* about black Americans' experience of racial segregation in the United States? Black American characters' forced separation from their white fellows in public places such as schools, libraries, and prisons on the American soil because of the color of their skin are illustrations of racial segregation in this work of fiction.

Knowing that the novel examined is linked to the historical facts of the United States, I find it necessary to resort to the new historicism. For, this approach helps me examine some points of history incorporated by Gaines into his narrative, as suggested by Greenblatt and Gallagher in these terms: "*New historicism acknowledges that any criticism of a work is necessarily tinged with the critic's beliefs, social structure, and so on*" (Greenblatt and Gallagher: 2015 ,119). This quotation shows that the new historicism consists in establishing the interplay between history and fiction within a work of literature. This is to say that what is said in a novel is naturally linked to the experience of people in their society.

Two main points are discussed in this paper. The first is the reference to racial segregation between black and white characters in schools, libraries, and prisons. The second tackles the impacts of racial segregation" on characters.

1.1. The reference to racial segregation in schools, libraries, and prisons

The expression "racial segregation" suggests that in writing *A Lesson Before Dying*, Ernest James Gaines was deeply inspired by black Americans' experience of physical separation and provision of separate facilities because of races in the United States after the Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863. This separation is shown in this narrative through the author's description of black characters as victims of racial segregation in schools, libraries, and prisons. In these public places, Blacks are prohibited to share the same seats, books, and cells with their white counterparts who ironically call them brothers and sisters. There are even laws prohibiting them to share the same schools with Whites for fear of getting the same education. In this novel, the author evidences this matter of school segregation through Dr. Joseph, a white

male character who is in charge of visiting black and white schools: “*Dr. Joseph visited the colored schools once a year, the white schools probably twice _ once each semester. There were a dozen schools in the parish to visit*” (ALBD, p. 53). In this quotation, the author deals with racial segregation that prevailed in the American society after Blacks’ Emancipation Proclamation. In fact, Whites’ opposition to their black fellows’ conception of racial mixing in the United States, urges them to live under the Jim Crow Laws, “equal but separate”. Their eagerness results in the building of Whites’ schools and Blacks’ ones which are not well equipped in comparison to those of their white counterparts.

Such a physical separation observed between Blacks and Whites in the United States suggests that any black citizen who attempts to enroll his children in a school reserved to Whites, is seen as a transgressor of the laws of the society, and can be jailed or murdered. For, these laws are voted by white American authorities who want them to be applied in all the spheres of the United States, as Alex Haley in *Mama Flora’s Family*, writes: “*The laws of segregation still applied and were enforced, but with more tact than in Georgia*” (Haley: 1999, 288). Through this quotation, Haley portrays black American soldiers who endure racial segregation because of their blackness in the American Army during the Second World War. He means that Blacks’ experience of segregation in this Army reflects their experience of slavery in Georgia where white masters sold, whipped, and killed them just like animals.

Gaines’s efforts to account for racial segregation in the white man’s world is also evident in the passage in which he shows how Blacks are separated from Whites in the American universities. They are not allowed to be seen in the universities reserved to Whites who do not want to graduate from the same universities as Blacks, because they see them as inferior citizens:

I was at the university then. The little Irishman was given a series of lectures at white universities, but some way or another, our university got him to visit us. How? Only God knows. But we were all gathered in the auditorium _ and there stood this little white man with the thick accent, talking to us about Irish literature (ALBD, p. 89).

As it can be seen, the sentence “the little Irishman was given a series of lectures at white universities” is a direct reference to racial segregation between Blacks and Whites in the American society. For, if there are white universities, there must also be black ones somewhere else where Blacks are supposed to get education as required by the laws of the American Government. Whites’ objection to Blacks’ conception of racial mixing, especially in the field of education is linked to the fear they have to see Blacks having better marks than those they may have. They do not want them to discover their intellectual weaknesses, because the discovery of these weaknesses may urge them to call into question their superior position before Blacks in the United States. What is worth knowing is that Gaines’s account for school segregation is far from being the result of his own imagination, for in *Mama Flora’s Family*, Alex Haley also tells the reader of Flora who finds it better for her son, Willie to be enrolled in one of the Blacks’ colleges instead of relying only on agricultural activities which depend on seasons:

She let herself imagine he would stay at school, and perhaps, in the fullness of time, even do something more. There were colleges for Negro boys, and hard work and good grades – and a scholarship – would get Willie into one of them. He would get his degree, and then a job, a regular job, a well-paying job, one not dependent on the season or the white man’s whim, and he would be more than his mother and father could possibly have imagined (Haley: 1999, 12).

This passage brings evidence that most of the American public places are prohibited not only to black American soldiers, but also to black civilians who are condemned to be taught in the schools only reserved to Blacks. This prohibition suggests that “*even though a school belonging to Whites is near a black man’s domicile, he has no alternative than finding a school for Blacks where he can easily enroll his children*” (N’zambi-Mikoulou et al.: 2017, 1410). The sentence “there were colleges for Negro boys” evidences that the author deals with segregation in this passage. For, if there are colleges for black Americans, there are surely colleges for white Americans, too, because Whites are opposed to the conception of equal education in the United States, as King states:

They were denied a political voice, refused equal education resources (enforced ignorance), confined to an economic system that left little room for ambition or hope, subjected to a criminal justice system that operated with ruthless efficiency in upholding the absolute power of whites to command black subordination and labor (King, quoted by Litwack: 2002, 38).

Through this passage, Martin Luther King shows how black Americans are totally separated from white Americans who still see them as submen. The refusal of “equal education” in the United States by Whites suggests that they are afraid of seeing their black counterparts discover their weaknesses, and perhaps having better marks than the ones they may have in classrooms. They even fear Blacks who may find the opportunity to blame them for their wrongs over Blacks. One understands that what Haley develops in his novel intertwines with Gaines’s account in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Both writers’ portrayal of Blacks’ experience in the United States is really a reconstruction of the “Jim Crow Laws” which extended in all the spheres of the American society as a new form of slavery undergone by Blacks.

Gaines’s portrayal of segregation in the American society is so evident that he continues to show how even mulattoes reject their own black sisters and brothers because of their blackness. Their white skin color which resembles that of white Americans urges them not to have seats in classrooms side by side with Blacks, as evidenced in this passage:

Anything not to work alongside with the niggers. With school it was the same. Many of them would drop out of school, would get a trade _ bricklayer or carpenter _ rather than sit in class side by side with the niggers. Their sisters went to high school and college, but they

would not. Rather take a trade than to sit next to the niggers (ALBD, p. 198).

For mulattoes, to be white in the United States is to be covered by a white skin color. This view makes them reject their own black fellows ignoring that they are also black with regard to the kind of blood which runs in their veins. What is true is that such a view which attests of their hatred for their own race, is not shared by white Americans. For the latter, mulattoes are black despite their physical appearance. This means that in the United States, a single drop of black blood found in a citizen's veins makes him or her black. It is exactly with regard to this conception that mulattoes are put together with Blacks to get education in black schools. Their wrongful attitude towards their own black peers in classrooms attests of their readiness to reject their own race in a democratic country where the latter are also segregated in transportation: "*Black Americans were frequently forced to wait until buses had been loaded with white soldiers before they were permitted to board them*" (Franklin: 1947, 396).

Another aspect linked to segregation in Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* is the prohibition made to Blacks by the American Government to be seen in libraries reserved to Whites. The author accounts for this kind of segregation through Grant, the black teacher who finds himself obliged to ask Mr. Anderson to find a book for him in the white library, because he does not find it the black one:

For days after, I tried to find that book. But it was not in our library and not in any of the bookstores. I went to Mr. Anderson, my literature teacher, and asked him if he knew how I could get a copy. (...) Mr. Anderson had gotten a professor at the white university to check the book out of his library for him (ALBD, p. 89).

This passage attests of segregation between Blacks and Whites in the American society. For, if there is a black library for Blacks, there must also be a white one for Whites where they are supposed to find useful books for their studies. Grant's awareness about this reality is what urges him to ask Mr. Anderson "to check the book out of his library for him". The fact that Grant does not find this book in the black library shows that this library is not well equipped in comparison to that of Whites. His relationship with Mr. Anderson as his literature teacher enables him to go to him to find a copy of the book for him in the library reserved to Whites.

Segregation as echoed in Gaines's narrative brings evidence that most of the white characters' educative places are prohibited to Blacks who are condemned not only to get books in the black libraries, but more to get education in the schools reserved to them. This prohibition implies that school segregation is observed in the American society not only in elementary schools, but also in universities, as evidenced below:

The courthouse was there; so was the jail. There was a Catholic church uptown for whites; a Catholic church back of town colored. There were two elementary schools uptown, one Catholic, one public, for whites; and the same back of town for colored (ALBD, p. 25).

Through this passage, the author shows how black Americans are totally separated from white Americans who still see them as submen despite their Emancipation Proclamation. Their refusal of equal education in the United States brings evidence that they do not want to share life with Blacks because of their blackness. What they really want is the creation of a white America. One understands that what Gaines develops in his novel is a reconstruction of the “Jim Crow Laws”. These laws suggest that Blacks constitute a menace to the white man’s life and freedom, as Margaret Walker in *Jubilee*, writes: “*All of them felt that in one way or another, the freed black people were a menace to the lives, property, and liberty of white people and their government*” (Walker: 1966, 271).

The way Ernest James Gaines insists on racial segregation in the field of education indicates that there is a restitution of historical facts in his novel. For, he gives the impression to make the reader hear the voices of those who suffered this white man’s racist system. It is clear that if *A Lesson Before Dying* does not mirror the American reality, it does give to the reader a general view of what was going on in the United States under the Jim Crow Laws which urged Whites to live separately from Blacks in places such as prisons. In this novel, the author reconstructs this form of racial segregation through Fee Jinkin who, during his sequences of life in prison, cleans restrooms reserved to white men and those of white women:

During the month that he was in jail, Fee Jinkins’s duty was to clean the sheriff’s office and the white men’s and white ladies’ restrooms. He started every morning between six and six-thirty and finished around eight or a little after (ALBD, p. 240).

This passage attests of racial segregation in American prisons, for if there are restrooms for white Americans, there must be restrooms for black ones, too. This means that there is a strict prohibition made to Blacks to use restrooms reserved to Whites. This prohibition is the consequence of Whites’ non-consideration of their black counterparts as full American citizens capable of cohabiting with them. For Whites, Blacks are uncivilized and dirty. This view urges them to avoid sharing the same restrooms with them in prisons. Despite Blacks’ Emancipation Proclamation which means they are now free to enjoy the full fruition of life, one notices that this freedom is rejected by white Americans who continue to consider them as inferior citizens for the simple reason that they are black. This is to say that Blacks’ tortures in American prisons are not only the consequence of their committed crimes, but more of their physical appearance which is hated by Whites in all the sphere of the United States.

Gaines’s account for black American characters as victim of racial segregation in American prisons is so excessive that he continues to demonstrate how the latter are forbidden to use the same bathrooms and cells with their white peers who ironically call them brothers and sisters. There are cells and bathrooms for white prisoners and those for black ones, too, as the narrator states: “*And bathrooms for white ladies and white men (...) The white prisoners were also on this floor, but in a separate section. I counted eight cells for black prisoners, with two bunks to each cell*” (ALBD, p. 71). In this quotation, black characters’ segregation by their white fellows is obvious, for one sees how the narrator shows it clearly through separate bathrooms and cells. This separation indicates that Whites are not ready yet to accept Blacks as human beings and American

citizens capable of sharing life with them. The way the author insists on this form of segregation in American prisons shows the degree of the white man's hatred for Blacks seen as second zone citizens.

White prisoners' refusal of sharing the same bathrooms and cells with black prisoners shows that the latter's bathrooms and cells are not as equipped as those of their white peers. This difference in terms of equipment added to their strong opposition to the conception of racial mixing, makes them live separately from Blacks in the United States. What is worth knowing is that this form of racial segregation is not only observed in prisons, but also in courthouses:

This toilet was for colored people who came to the courthouse (...) It was always filthy, and like everyone I knew, I tried to avoid going down there. But that was the only place to go. The toilets inside were for whites only (ALBD, p. 69).

The fact that racial segregation is evident in the American Courthouse and in prisons attests of white American authorities' participation in this inhuman practice. What they ignore is that by encouraging racial segregation, they hamper the development of the United States which is doomed to go ahead with the contribution of Blacks in all the fields of life. The more Blacks are victims of racial segregation, the less they find their interest in participating in the development of this great nation. Racial segregation, as evidenced in *A Lesson Before Dying*, may lead the reader to object the American democracy. What is true is that Blacks are condemned to endure such an inhuman practice because, according to Whites, they are not able to make assumptions about existence that Whites can, as the narrator in Julius Lester's *And All Our Wounds Forgiven*, recalls:

White people are able to make assumptions about existence that a Negro can't. When you are white you assume that the cab driver who refuses to stop for you didn't see you; he's on his way somewhere; he's listening to the radio and not paying attention; he's a son-of-a-bitch who deserves to die a slow and painful death. When you are black you are deprived of the security of such assumption. Whatever the adversity, the look of the clerk in a store, the destruction of your house by tornado, it is safer to assume it happened because you are black. You must make that assumption because the world has never invited you to be part of it and its assumptions that constitute the norm (Lester: 1994, 101).

In this passage, the narrator's memory goes back to some aspects of Blacks' sufferings in the United States. Here, the author through John Calvin Marshall refers to the moment when African Americans were denied justice and equality because of the color of their skin. In fact, a black man must not put questions about knowing why the cab driver passes straight on without stopping for him, but must simply know that he has done it on purpose, for he cannot stop for a person who is not white like himself.

This form of racial segregation observed in transportation is as the same as the one portrayed by Gaines in *A Lesson Before Dying* in the context of prisons. In the following quotation, for example, one sees how he continues to account for this inhuman practice through Miss Emma who is astonished to find out that there is a restroom marked “white men” in the prison wherein Jefferson endures tortures from white American officers: “*When we came to the restroom marked white men, he went inside. We waited for him along the wall. Five minutes later, he came out with another white man*” (ALBD, p. 188). This quotation shows that in American prisons, black American prisoners’ visitors are prohibited to have seats in the restrooms reserved to Whites. This means that the only place where they can have a talk with black prisoners or have a rest in American prisons is in the Blacks’ restrooms. The transgression of such a prohibition by them may bring about severe punishments, for there are specific restrooms for them and for Whites, too.

Gaines’s depiction of Blacks as victims of racial segregation in prisons gives his narrative the form of a historiography, for one knows that after the abolition of slavery, a great number of white Americans preferred segregation to mixing races in public places, as evidenced by Dalfiume: “*The majority of Whites interviewed in the North East and West expressed a preference for separate schools, separate restaurants, and separate neighborhoods for the races*” (Dalfiume: 1968, 103). This quotation brings evidence that there is a restitution of actual-historical facts of the United States in Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*, for what Dalfiume says here is a perfect illustration of what is portrayed in this work of fiction. The separation of white Americans from their black peers that he raises is without any doubt part of black American prisoners’ experience in the American prisons.

What is worth recalling is that some white Americans are opposed to the practice of racial segregation in the American society. In *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, for example, Killens evidences this reality through a dialogue between a white bus driver and a white soldier in these terms: “*All right, get aboard, the driver said. But these men were here before us, the serious faces white soldier said. That’s the colored line, the driver said. They get on last. That’s the law*” (Killens: 1963, 119). The sentence “these men were here before us” attests of this white man’s recognition of Blacks not as submen, but as full American citizens who are equal to Whites with the right to seat at any place in a bus. This is to say that there are some Whites who condemn their white peers’ racist view over their black brothers and sisters. But what is worth retaining is that white Americans’ wrongful attitude towards their black peers because of their black skin color brings about some negative impacts on the latter’s lifestyle in the United States, as demonstrated in the section below.

1.2. The impacts of racial segregation on black American characters

In Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*, the term “impacts” refers to all negative effects of racial segregation endured by black characters in the American society. They are forbidden to get enrollment or have education in the schools reserved to Whites where learning and teaching conditions are of good quality and where the school period is very significant. While white American learners are taught from October to June yearly, black American ones are, however, forced to end studies at any moment whenever they are needed on Whites’ plantations, as Grant Wiggins, a black teacher explains:

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 the children were not needed in the field ... (ALBD, p. 34).

This passage, as it can be seen, evidences the consequences of racial segregation on black characters, for one sees how their school period is disturbed because of their white counterparts who find it better to use them on plantations rather than giving them a chance to study all along the school year as their children do. The fact of forcing black learners to work on plantations for Whites' interests makes it impossible for their teachers to teach the same way as white teachers do. Consequently, black learners' education cannot be of good quality in comparison to that of their white counterparts who have classes without any disturbance all along the school year.

When Grant, for example, says that "I taught only five and a half months, from October to the middle of April, when the children were not needed in the field", he lets the reader know that he is not well rewarded for his teaching task, for he does not teach throughout the school year like those who teach in the schools reserved to Whites. His utterance also shows that what counts for Whites is not black learners' education but the task they have to fulfill on plantations. This means that, for Whites, Blacks' education is not taken as a priority. Educating them is simply a way to occupy them when there are no activities on plantations.

Segregation observed between Whites and Blacks in educative institutions results in the mixture of grades within the same classroom in the schools only reserved to Blacks. While each grade corresponds to one classroom in Whites' schools, black teachers are, however, obliged to mix grades in the same classroom in Blacks' schools and give classes to their learners who sometimes have seats on the ground because of the lack of enough benches:

I asked my third and fourth graders to go to the back of the church to work on the blackboards. The third-grade class would do arithmetic on the board on the back wall, and the fourth grades would write sentences on the board on the right-side wall (ALBD, p. 35).

The author's mention of this passage is a way to tell the reader about the poor conditions of studies in the schools reserved to Blacks. For, one sees how racial segregation applied by their white peers compels them to be taught in the same classrooms regardless of their differences in terms of grades. What makes their teachers give them classes in such circumstances is their awareness about school segregation in all the sphere of the United States. It is exactly because of this segregation that white inspectors are not motivated when it comes to visiting black schools. They prefer to devote their time to visiting white schools to black ones so as to put at the disposal of their white fellows a very good quality of education, as confessed by the narrator in these terms: "*Dr Joseph visited the colored schools once a year, the white schools probably twice-once each semester. There were a dozen schools in the parish to visit, if that many*" (ALBD, p. 53).

The fact that black schools are not regularly visited by this white inspector is an illustration of the negative impact of school segregation in the American society. For, if schools were not segregated, this inspector would visit all schools the same way. The privilege he gives to white

schools is linked to his racial belonging which is different from that of Blacks. This privilege attests not only of all white Americans' hatred for Blacks, but more of their non-consideration of black schools as places where people can receive good education. That is why black learners and teachers are never taken as heroes even after showing their intellectual endeavors to their white counterparts, as noticed by Grant:

I could never be a hero. I teach, but I don't like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the South today. I don't like it, I hate it. I don't even like living here. I want to run away. I want to live for myself and for my woman and for nobody else (ALBD, p. 191).

It is exactly because of school segregation that Grant, the black teacher who embodies all black teachers' experience in the South of the United States is condemned to teach only in the schools reserved to Blacks. Being in this part of the world where segregation reigns, he does not have the opportunity to go and look for a job in white schools. Whatever the kind of salary he may receive for his teachings in black schools he is compelled to do with it, for there is no alternative about the matter of school segregation. This segregation even urges American mulattos to reject their black brothers and sisters ignoring that they are also black despite the color of their skin which looks white like that of all white Americans:

Since emancipation, almost a hundred years ago, (...) anything to work alongside the niggers. With school it was the same. Many of them would drop out of school, would get a trade-bricklayer or carpenter-rather than sit in class side by side with the niggers. Their sisters went to high school and college, but they would not. Rather take a trade than to sit next to the niggers (ALBD, p. 198).

Through this passage, one understands that the author deals with the impacts of racial segregation in the educative field, for he shows how mulattoes are not ready to have classes in the same classrooms as their black fellows. Their white skin color urges them to behave after a fashion of white Americans by refusing to share seats with their black colleagues. What they ignore is that, for Whites, to be white is not a byword for having the white skin color, but having the white blood running in one's veins. Actually, the issue of racial conflicts between Blacks and Whites related in *A Lesson Before Dying*, does not derive from the author's personal imagination. It is, on the contrary, an actual fact of history recognized by Martin Luther King who reminds the reader of what his mother told him in these terms:

My mother confronted the age-old problem of the Negro parent in America: How to explain discrimination and segregation to a small child. She taught me that I should feel a sense of 'somebodiness' but that on the other hand I had to go out and face a system that stared me in the face every day saying you are 'less than', you are not 'equal to' (King, quoted by Carson: 2000, 3).

This passage shows that *A Lesson Before Dying* is a reflection of the American History. For, one sees how King's utterances intertwine with what is reconstructed in this work of fiction. In prisons, for example, black prisoners are isolated in the cells where white prisoners cannot be found for the simple reason that they are white. This prison segregation makes it impossible for white American officers to treat black and white prisoners the same way even though they are jailed because of the same crime. It is noticed that the treatment reserved to white prisoners is a bit acceptable in comparison to that of black ones who suffer the white man's racist system. While the white prisoners' cells have lights which enable visitors to reach these cells easily, those of black prisoners are in darkness, as evidenced by Grant who argues:

We followed him down a long, dark corridor, (...) Then we went through a heavy steel door to the area where the prisoners were quartered. I counted eight cells for black prisoners, with two bunks to each cell (ALBD, p. 71).

The way Grant informs the reader about cells reserved to black prisoners shows that there is a big difference between these black cells and those of white prisoners. This difference is nothing but the result of racial segregation which gangrenes the American society. For, if there was no racial segregation in prisons, all prisoners would be treated equally in the same cells regardless of their racial belonging. Segregation is, to some extent, the cause of racial conflicts observed between Blacks and Whites within American prisons. White Americans' non-consideration of their black counterparts as full American citizens who deserve the full fruition of the American democracy makes them jail black prisoners in cells deprived of seats or toilet papers, as Grant continues to evidence it in these terms:

He didn't answer, and kept his eyes on the ceiling. The cell was roughly six by ten, with a metal bunk covered by a thin mattress and a woolen army blanket; a toilet without seat or toilet paper; a washbowl, brownish from residue and grime (ALBD, p. 71).

In this passage, Grant insists on black prisoners' bad living conditions in one of the American jails where Jefferson, the black male character endures all wrongful treatments from white American officers who have no mercy for all Blacks because of their blackness. When he, for instance, recalls that there is "a toilet without seat or toilet paper", he means that seats and toilet papers should normally be found in black cells, too, as it the case in those of white prisoners. For, they are all prisoners who should deserve the same treatment regardless of their skin color or origin. Unfortunately, this conception is objected by the white man who finds pleasure in living separately from his black peers not only in prisons, but also in all public places such as schools, restaurants, and drinking fountains.

The impacts of racial segregation are observable in *A Lesson Before Dying* through the author's description of black prisoners' living conditions in jails which are not as the same as those reserved to white prisoners. It is noticed that while the latter are fed by white American officers in their jail cells, black prisoners have to ask for money to visitors in order to have something to eat:

The prisoners would hear us coming, and they would stand at the cell doors with their hands stuck out between the bars. As she had done the first time, Miss Emma promised that they could have the food Jefferson did not eat. (...) Miss Emma left the cell crying, and both times she told the young deputy to give the food to the other children (ALBD, p. 76).

This passage attests of black prisoners' mistreatment by white American officers who push them to beg by leaving them hungry in jail cells while white prisoners are fed daily. This pitiful act which attests of black prisoners' plight in the white man's world is due to Whites' refusal of cohabiting with their black fellows in public places. For, if white and black prisoners were put together in cells regardless of the color of their skin, it would be difficult for white American officers to feed only white prisoners. Black prisoners would perhaps have a chance to eat with their white jail mates, and would not become beggars. The fact that they ask for money and food to any visitor passing through the corridor that goes along their cells shows the inferior position they occupy before the white man in the United States. What is worth knowing is that this inferior position is the result of the suffering they endure in jail cells not maybe because of the crimes they have committed, but more of their blackness on the American soil.

2.CONCLUSION

At the end of this analysis, one understands that racial segregation between Blacks and Whites in Ernest James Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* is more applied in the educative domain and in prisons where Blacks are strongly forbidden to share the same schools, libraries, and jail cells with their white counterparts. This is due to the latter's opposition to the conception of racial mixing extolled by some historical-black figures of the United States such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, to quote only two. This racial segregation brings about some negative consequences on the lifestyle of black American characters. It is noticed that while white schools are well built and crammed with good pedagogical materials and teachers who teach all along the school period, black ones are, however, unfashionable with teachers deprived of good teaching materials and whose teaching period is very often shortened, because their learners have to go and work for Whites' interests on plantations. In prisons, for example, racial segregation results in injustice observed through the way of treating prisoners. While white prisoners are fed daily and put into jail cells with seats and toilet papers, black prisoners find theirs deprived of these important artifacts. In portraying such a lifestyle of Blacks in the white man's world, I dare say that Ernest James Gaines has really succeeded in exploring one of the literary issues which consists in incorporation actual-historical facts into a work of fiction. For, his portrayal does reflect the history of Blacks and Whites in the United States.

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