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A MARXIST READING OF ERNEST GAINES' *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

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Abstract: This study presents *A Lesson Before Dying* as a Marxist work insofar as the fictional society that it depicts explores all the significant characteristics of capitalist societies. Laying bare class division in St Raphael parish, it reveals the existence of a bourgeois class made up of wealthy landlords and authorities at the head of local institutions on the one hand, and a proletarian class, the black community, which is actually its working class. Eventually, the study reveals that, in a purely Marxist perspective, the *base* of this society is the plantation economy which generates a specific *superstructure*. Mainly established to defend the interests of landowners, this superstructure is displayed through a biased judiciary system, through repressive and ideological apparatuses that seek to reinforce blacks' subservience, but equally through individuals whose activity consists in defending the labor ideology.

Keywords: St Raphael Parish – class division – working class – Ideological – Repression– labor ideology – plantation economy.

Résumé

Cette étude présente *A Lesson Before Dying* comme une œuvre Marxiste dans la mesure où la société fictionnelle qu'elle dépeint expose toutes les caractéristiques essentielles des sociétés capitalistes. Mettant à nu la division des classes au sein de la paroisse de St Raphael, elle révèle l'existence d'une classe bourgeoise constituée de riches propriétaires terriens et d'autorités à la tête des institutions locales d'une part, et d'autre part, une classe prolétaire, qui est en fait la communauté noire, et qui est également sa classe ouvrière. Finalement, l'étude révèle que, dans une perspective marxiste pure, la *base* de cette société est l'économie de plantation qui génère une *superstructure* spécifique. Etablie principalement pour défendre les intérêts des propriétaires terriens, cette superstructure s'appréhende à travers un système judiciaire défectueux, à travers les appareils répressifs et idéologiques qui ont pour rôle de renforcer la servilité des noirs, mais également à travers d'individus dont l'activité consiste à défendre l'idéologie du travail.

Mots clés : La Paroisse de St Raphael – la division des classes – classe ouvrière – idéologiques– répression– l'économie de la plantation – l'idéologie du travail.

Introduction

A Lesson Before Dying chronicles the misadventures of Jefferson, an helpless African American young male, who has to suffer the heartlessness of the rural South's oppressive machine of the 1940s. Wrongfully accused of robbery and the murder of a white man, Jefferson is condemned by the ruling class to die by electrocution. Although his connection to the crime has not been proved during the trial, the all-white jury agrees that Jefferson must be executed. Actually, Jefferson must die not because he is guilty, but because he is of an inferior status, and perhaps even more to help emphasize whites' unmatched supremacy in the southern hemisphere of the United States. Such injustices are perpetrated in order to maintain the socio-racial status quo together with the existing economic gap. Therefore, Jefferson's condemnation and execution constitute ruling instruments at the hands of the white community for it to maintain the African Americans' subjugation and exploitation.

By presenting Jefferson as a scapegoat, Gaines not only underscores whites' inhumanity, the suffocating hegemony that makes no concessions to the black community, and a corrupt system that serves the selfish interests of the ruling class, but he denounces the tricks of a capitalistic culture. *A Lesson Before Dying* resoundingly seems to suggest that St Raphael Parish is a capitalist society where the bourgeoisie, often blinded by materialistic cupidity, becomes insensitive to the sufferings of others and seeks by all means to maintain the status quo.

The present paper analyzes the major reasons why *A Lesson Before Dying* suits a Marxist Reading. Specifically, the study highlights the key characteristics of the rural South's capitalistic culture and demonstrates that St Raphael Parish is indeed a capitalistic world although its economy is exclusively based on the plantation.

Using the perspective of Classical Marxism, as presented by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, I will first demonstrate that St Raphael Parish brings together a bourgeois class and a proletariat and that the former mercilessly exploits the latter. Then, summoning Louis Althusser's instruments of Marxist analysis, I argue that the bourgeoisie rules using both the repressive and the ideological apparatuses to subdue and exploit the working classes. Lastly, I prove the existence of a labor ideology (a typical ideology powered to maintain the plantation economy) in almost every major activity undertaken by white rulers.

I- St Raphael, a Capitalistic Society

I - 1 Class Division in St Raphael Parish

A Lesson Before Dying cannot reasonably escape a Marxist interpretation because the novel unveils a prominent characteristic of capitalistic societies: class division. In Marxist theory, the class structure of the capitalist mode of production is characterized by the conflict between two main classes: “the haves” or the bourgeoisie, those who own the means of production, and the “have-nots”, known as the proletariat or working class, a much larger group of people, who must sell their own labor power. Marxists deplore the fact that in capitalistic economies, those who do all the work are paradoxically those who are deprived of its profits because the wealth they create goes to fill the coffins of the rich. So while all the dynamism of the economy largely depends on their hard work, the proletarians remain poor and reliant on further exploitative work for survival. In the eyes of Marxists, Capitalism is an unacceptable economic régime because it promotes inequality, that it seeks to normalize and reproduce basically through cultural ideology.

Karl Marx’s perception of class as a combination of objective and subjective factors is instrumental in identifying and labeling the classes in *A Lesson before Dying*. He specifies that, objectively, a class shares a common relation to the means of production. Therefore, according to Marx, could be referred to as belonging to a same class all the individuals who have the same working obligations and conditions. With Marx’s elucidation, it becomes quite reasonable to see St Raphael’s black community as a distinct class: the working class. It is indeed the black community that provides all the labor power to the plantation economy.

Marx also identifies a subjective element in class perception: “class consciousness”. According to the above factor, an individual may define his class according to his perception of his similarity and common interest with others. Visibly, the individual’s awareness of his class interest is central. But beyond this awareness, class consciousness encompasses a set of shared views concerning how society should be organized legally, culturally, socially and politically. Class here is more a result of social construct where each member has something to defend or protect than an objective definition. Seen from this second perspective, the minority of white individuals who control St Raphael both socially and economically can be regarded as a class. And Jefferson’s case helps reveal a delicately intertwined network of interdependent and mutually supporting powerful well-to-do men who understand that the white community’s livelihood and the survival of the plantation economy largely depends on

their initiatives. Whenever it comes to the defense of their common interest, there is no more demarcation line between landowners and local officials at the heads of institutions such as the police, the court, and the prison. This homogeneity first appears during Jefferson's trial. During the trial indeed, all the lawyers (both the prosecution and the defense), the twelve jurors, and the judge agree that the only role known to a black male, and by extension, to all the black community members, is to serve whites. The defense attorney's words are particularly tough and they accurately encapsulate the spirit: "What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn." (*Lesson*, 7-8). Since Jefferson's alleged murder of a white man threatens that framework, the ruling class of this part of the South decides to put things the right way up by condemning him to die by electrocution. Jefferson's condemnation is therefore more the result of a politico-strategic decision than a legal one. It is a team work whereby the interests of the said class must be protected.

Class division is also revealed through Grant Wiggins' descriptions of the practices that often occur at wealthy whites' houses. In an influential white person's house, Grant observes, one's class entitles him/her to a particular place. Whites use the front door entrance whereas blacks use the back door entrance. Inside the house, whites may go wherever they like whereas blacks cannot. And worse still, the only place where they are allowed to stay is the kitchen, while whites' most preferred places are the library and the living room. The library has a particularly significant meaning for them perhaps because this place incarnates power. In addition to this compartmentalization of the house, Grant observes that influential whites often get together to drink, eat and socialize as a way of showing their interest convergence and class homogeneity, but also their victory over the ruled class.

The Pichots' family, the owners of the parish plantation and landowners, the heads of the local institutions, namely Sheriff Guidry, the police officer, the Judge and lawyers, make up this class. Although they are from different professional horizons, they seem to be united by a common interest: the preservation of their socio-economic hegemony. While observing the Pichots and their friends in the story, Engels's definition of the notion of "bourgeoisie" in the *Communist Manifesto* comes forcefully to one's mind: "the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour." (Engels, 14) Indeed, this group is the wealthiest one of the parish. Every economic action seems to be directed towards their wellbeing. As evidence, they always show signs of ostensible wealth

and happiness: they live in big cozy houses with screen doors, they have all the social, political and economic power, and while blacks are always painstakingly working in fields, they often go about having parties.

As the ruling class, they dictate their views to society. To some extent, their responsibility is to make sure that the law and the southern codes that subjugate blacks keep their strength. It is important to underline the preponderant role played by such codes in class division. Actually, these codes are part of the subtle means that the ruling class handles to maintain the South's status quo whereby blacks are to remain perpetually inferior and servile individuals. For, by making sure that the codes are effective, the ruling class safely preserves its own hegemony and maintains blacks on the other side of the color line. Among other codes, *A Lesson Before Dying*, emphasizes the following: the one related to the back door entrance, the ones that reinforce anti-amalgamation, the one that seeks to show the black person as a stupid person, the one that insists that blacks must stay in the kitchen, and the one that constrains blacks to be scrupulously respectful to white people.

Like all parishes in the rural South, St Raphael is characterized by the existence of two opposed classes: the rich (the bourgeoisie) and the poor (the proletariat). The bourgeois class of St Raphael is constituted by its ruling class, those who directly control the plantation economy and all the influential whites at the head of institutions such as the police, the criminal justice system and the like. The other class, the proletariat, is the black community. Living in extreme poverty, the members of this community must continue to work on plantations to ensure their survival. Seen from this perspective, it cannot be denied that they are the productive forces or the labor force of the plantation economy even if in the Marxist theory, productive forces include labor and materials, that is, both means of production and workers who operate the means of production. Definitely, what tallies St Raphael's black community to productive forces, is that they enter the social division of labor.

The existence of antagonistic classes in the form of a bourgeoisie and a proletariat is without doubt a seminal criterion which demonstrates that St Raphael is indeed a capitalistic society. But there exists other equally significant elements that reinforce its capitalistic image. Foremost among them is exploitation as the basis of the plantation economy.

I – 2 Exploitation and the Plantation Economy.

The rural south in general and St Raphael Parish in particular, functions like a capitalistic society. Regarding wealth and profit making as its priorities, the ruling class must

maintain an economic system based on exploitation. Whereas in modern capitalistic societies, the economy is based on industries, in the South, wealth is derived from plantations. Indeed the plantation economy works chiefly to fill the coffers of the aristocracy and therefore allow whites/ the ruling class to maintain their aristocratic living standards. If at the Pichots' big and impressive house, the group of well-to-do whites can drink, eat and socialize comfortably, it is because of the profits that are yielded by field hands' hard work.

Actually, *A Lesson Before Dying* does not lay a straightforward emphasis on the economy by describing the economic functioning of the system, but it does depict effects of a capitalist economic system. It is because of the field work that the bunch of whites can afford the living standard they are enjoying. The exploitation undergone by the working classes upholds the wealth of the landlords which they use for their happy moments. Even the impressive big house is in itself a symbol of the rugged capitalism of the south. Its maintenance depends in a large measure on the excruciating but poorly-paid work of underprivileged working classes. To be able to maintain its living standard, the ruling class must overexploit the workers, which often implies being overworked and underpaid. In his diary, Jefferson recalls how even as a child he was not spared by the exploitation of the plantation system:

It look like the lord just work for wite folks cause ever sens i wasn nothing but a little boy I been on my own haulin water to the fiel on that ol water cartwit all them dime bukets an that dipper jus hittin an ol dorthy just trottin and trottin me an up their hittin her wit that rope an all them dime bukets and that dipper jus hittin an hittin against that bal of water so i can get the peple they food an they water on time an the peple see me an drop they hoe an com and git they buket cause they kno they string or they mark on the top... (*Lesson*, 227)

The passage above highlights Jefferson's premature introduction in the world of field work. Unable to hold a hoe at his age, he can at least, provide field workers with their food and water. But actually, it underscores children's contribution in the plantation economy. By inserting such a depiction in his narrative, Gaines emphasizes the hideous face of a system which does not even spare children. Its capitalistic greed is to such extent that it cannot afford to waste a productive energy on jobs like fetching and delivering food and water by using an adult. In order that the adults' productivity might be fully exploited, this activity has to be carried out by children.

Children's exploitation in the plantation economy is not new with Ernest Gaines. In *Of Love and Dust*, Sidney Bonbon would often resort to children to unload his cargoes of corn and get the carriage ready for the following day. In this respect, what should have been paid work in a fair society suddenly becomes an activity cunningly assigned to children to be done free of charge.

Exploitation is indeed the cornerstone of the parish plantation economy. This is evidenced by the striking paradox of black people's condition. Although they are the ones doing all the physical work, they remain the poorest and the most vulnerable of society. They live in poor conditions and can hardly afford satisfactory sanitation and food. For most, their livelihood depends on an unremitting daily work in the fields. And since they are not well-paid, they become permanently dependent upon this work to survive and therefore remain at the mercy of landlords. It is obvious that being underpaid and kept in poverty is a strategy used by capitalists to ensure the vitality and sustainability of their economic system. Uneducated people who are poorly paid have reduced mobility which increases their dependence on the only job they have struggled to secure.

Concluding that St Raphael is a capitalist society because there is class antagonism together with economic exploitation would not sound meaningless (since these are two major features of capitalism), but such a conclusion would appear to be unsatisfactory, for it would overlook an important element of contemporary Marxist criticism: Louis Althusser's State Apparatuses and ideology.

II - The Ruling Apparatuses

II-1 The Repressive Apparatuses

What Althusser says of the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) is true in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Identified as hard power (a form of power that operates by means of violence), the RSAs consist of the army, the police, the judiciary, and the prison system. They operate primarily by means of mental and physical coercion and violence, either latent or actual. Althusser's views are primarily based on the State which he sees as a repressive apparatus used by the ruling class as an instrument to dominate the working class. Following his analysis, the basic function of the Repressive State Apparatuses is to intervene and act in favor of the ruling class by repressing the ruled class using violent and coercive means.

Yet, Althusser's views apply to all societies which include such binaries as ruling and ruled classes, bourgeoisie and proletariat. Because the exercise and maintenance of the socio-economic power almost always requires the use of force, the rulers (often the bourgeois) must resort to the RSAs. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, St Raphael Parish functions like a State. With its ruling and working classes, it functions autonomously and quite independently from national policies. Although it uses the national State apparatuses such as the police, the courts and the prison, their utilization seems to privilege the cause of the parish local rulers.

While analyzing the way the RSAs function in *A Lesson Before Dying*, we realize that Althusser's explanation that they function as a unified entity, that is, as an organized whole, is a foolproof premise. Indeed, the police, the court and the prison in St Raphael work in a close relation. It is through Jefferson's lot that this relation is made explicit. After Gropé, an old white shopkeeper has been murdered, Jefferson is the only suspect found on the crime scene. Although he has not been caught red-handed, the police arrest him without the least of investigation. So despite his innocence, Jefferson is tried and condemned by an all-white jury to be jailed and ultimately be electrocuted. While awaiting his execution in prison, Jefferson undergoes all sort of violence (verbal, psychological and physical). During the trial, both the prosecutor and the defense attorney describe him as an animal unworthy of human treatment, and Jefferson internalizes the insults very bitterly. He is so deeply affected by the aggression that he starts acting like the hog they compare him to. In prison, Jefferson faces other inhuman treatments: isolation, discomfort, darkness, and permanent psychological torture caused by his ineluctable execution.

To control St Raphael's black community, repression is carried out through the following institutions: the police, the court, the prison, and a very odd instrument: the electric chair. It is mainly through Jefferson's tribulations that the reader perceives the interconnected exercise and coercive power of these instruments in the novel and discovers the particularly dreadful apparatus: the electric chair. The electric chair is indeed the uppermost expression of human cruelty. Apart from extremist racists, every soul feels shocked either from seeing it or from hearing its sound. For example, those who saw the chair as it arrived from the town to the local courthouse described it as "gruesome", "mean" and quite frightening. Even those who did not see it could tell from its sound how horrible it was.

By making Jefferson (such a meek and inoffensive male) fall victim to such a horrible machine, Gaines highlights the disproportion of whites' brutality. Indeed taking such a character as victim demonstrates how cruel the oppressive machine of the parish plantation is. Arrests and executions like Jefferson's occur quite often throughout the South, and they mean to reinforce the white community's control over the whole black community. It is a warning to other blacks that the white community must never be challenged, either intentionally or inadvertently.

Because the RSAs function predominantly by means of repression and violence and secondarily by ideology, they are definitely the most ostensible apparatuses in society. Yet, they are certainly not the most effective, at least, in terms of capitalist governance. They may never be as operational as the ideological State apparatuses (ISAs) which function in a concealed, symbolic and calculated manner.

II-2 The Ideological Apparatuses

For Althusser, a ruling class cannot keep its power through violence and coercion alone. It has to subdue its subjects through ideology. Althusser posits that ideology is articulated through social institutions like school, the church, the family, the media, etc. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, ideology is conveyed through two major institutions: the church and school.

II-2-1 The Parish Plantation Church

The church practices are revealed by one man, a fervent Christian, who dedicates his life to the defense of the principles of Christianity: Reverend Ambrose. He is the minister of the parish black community church. Although he is surrounded by a few elders, he is the epitome of Christian faith in the novel. He defends and incarnates the submissive ideology of the black church. Because of that, Reverend Ambrose believes that religion is worthier than manhood. His position clearly emerges when he clashes with Grant over Jefferson. While Grant believes that Jefferson must stand as a man before dying, Reverend Ambrose wants him to kneel down. As such, the reverend is perpetuating the dogmatic and passive character of religion. He argues that what Jefferson needs to save while awaiting an ineluctable death is the soul. What use would it be to fight to restore dignity when one is certain to die? And as he philosophizes, he recalls that his job as a preacher is to appease people, to relieve them from their suffering, and ultimately pacify them. The position of Reverend and, hence, that of the church, is indeed revealed through the conflict between the latter in Grant Wiggins about how

Jefferson must die. While Grant has an existentialist view of humanity (because he would like the individual to rely on his own human capabilities to determine his existence), Reverend Ambrose defends the dogmatic positions of the church. By urging Jefferson to kneel down before his last hour, the preacher wants him to accept religion as the only way whereby an individual can determine his humanity. Actually, Rev. Ambrose's exhortation exalts continuity, submission to the established order, and by extension, submission to the white community.

It is unarguable that what the church wants is to create conditions for a peaceful environment, where individuals (blacks) accommodate to the southern policies. It is therefore not pointless to conclude that although the black church in the rural south is not ruled directly by whites, it appears as one of their subtle but efficient means to control blacks. In such a context, every concession is meaningful. The privileges the minister enjoys, which include more freedom of mobility, closer contact with the white community and more consideration on behalf of whites, are concessions intended to stultify him. Because when he regards the privileges his title grants him in the midst of an ostensible adversity, he sees he must struggle to maintain such a position. Apparently, his struggle is for the sake of the religion, but at a deeper level, his commitments are selfish. So long as he plays the mediating role, he is sure to rid his personal life of southern blacks' tribulations. So long as there is a working class, there will be a need to 'lie' to people. And so long as he can get his "lies" accepted by his fellows, the white community will in turn always concede him some privileges. Where other people need special authorizations before doing anything, black ministers are systematically authorized. For example, to obtain the right to visit Jefferson at the jailhouse, Grant needs to go through a complicated process of negotiation punctuated by humiliations, ridicule, uncertainties and exhaustion. The sheriff even fears that Grant might aggravate the detainee and warns that he will stop the visits soon as he perceives any sign of aggravation. By contrast, Reverend Ambrose's admission in any premise is unconditioned. He can enter whites' houses (of course through the back door entrance) and the jailhouse as freely and often as he wishes. Whites know that he will never teach anything subversive to his fellows. The southern church, represented here by Rev. Ambrose, has consistently promoted prostration and submission to social norms. The position of the reverend against this expression of humanity, dignity, and masculinity actually indicates the church's fight to prevent the emancipation of black people. Thus, by requesting blacks' submission, southern ministers give a hand to the will of the white community. These ministers therefore operate,

as we mentioned earlier, as envoys of the ruling class with the hidden aim (sometimes even unknown to them) of pacifying the world of the working classes. Because of the good conditions they enjoy within their communities in the one hand, and their privileged treatment by the white community on the other, black ministers are already enfeebled to fight a battle for a wider cause. In such positions they can but maneuver to maintain a socio-economic configuration that does them no harm. So it would not be unreasonable to assert that the working classes in the South are generally sacrificed on the altar of partisan interests of ministers.

It is actually Grant's existentialist view of humanity that allows the reader to clearly perceive the church's ideological role. Condemning Jefferson to die by electrocution, the white community needed to justify its cruel choice with the argument that its victim is unintelligent, a brute whose unique function is to perform works that only require physical force. (*Lesson*, 7) It was therefore to cleanse this stereotyped identity that Grant had undertaken actions to allow him to walk like a man before his execution, thereby proving his humanity to his detractors. To that end, he had brought presents to Jefferson in his jail cell: a radio, a notebook and a pencil. To fight Grant's initiatives, the reverend had gone so far as to denigrate those meaningful gifts regarding them as sinful objects. While Grant saw in these gifts the most appropriate means to reconnect Jefferson with the human thoughts he was about to lose due to the devastating effect of the court lawyers' discourses, Reverend Ambrose believed that all these things would cause him to lose his soul. With this example, Gaines underlines the southern preachers' proclivities to oppose every meaningful way by which a black individual's humanity can emerge. Besides, it underscores how, even without being present, whites can inhibit black people through their religious figures. Through Reverend Ambrose indeed, the role and aim of the southern church are highlighted.

Clearly, the ministers' struggle to break any protest attempt within the black community is the white community's subtle means to control blacks. The parish plantation church is without any doubt an ideological apparatus which draws its success from the subtleties and the false impression that the black church is handled by blacks themselves. Terry Eagleton is right when he writes in his book *Ideology: An Introduction* that "A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it, naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some

unspoken but systematic logic; and obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself.” (Eagleton, 5-6)

Yet, if this ideology is camouflaged with the church, it is more noticeable with school.

II-2-2 The Parish Plantation School

The parish plantation school is perhaps the most obvious, ostensible and effective ideological apparatus in the novel. Its premises, mode of functioning, and objectives are displayed by Grant as he denounces both its shortcomings and ideological dysfunctions in his narration.

As the reader scrutinizes Grant’s story, he can easily understand that he feels trapped and disappointed by what he must do as a teacher. He complains that the parish plantation school only teaches the basics of education, not anything about life, love and dignity: ‘I have always done what they wanted me to do, teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Nothing else – nothing about dignity, nothing about identity, nothing about loving and caring.’ (*Lesson*, 192) Grant’s complaint allows the reader to understand that such a school cannot favor the emergence of full American citizens because of the deficiency of its content. Instead, and this seems unarguable, it helps build individuals whose insertion in the wider society is jeopardized. Such half-instructed individuals are products for the plantation economy where they do not necessarily need intellectualized mindsets.

By denouncing the content of his teaching which only focuses on arithmetic, reading and writing, Grant also suggests that the southern black school is utterly ineffective. Judging from what Grant teaches (the basics of education), there has not been much change from the period of slavery to the 1940s. Where education is allowed, it should be confined to the basics, to such extent that a black learner might never be able to discover the world of thought. Instead, educating a black person should consist in getting him ready to understand and carry out simple instructions. Seen in this perspective, the parish plantation school works mainly to achieve the same goal as the Althusserian educational state apparatus’s in capitalist societies. Althusser theorizes that in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce it must therefore reproduce two things: the productive forces and the existing relations of production. Althusser’s theorizations aim to interpret modern capitalistic societies, but they are also valid for the interpretation of plantation economies where a labor force is also clearly

identifiable. And closely analyzing the parish plantation school, Althusser's view that "the reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order," (*Norton Anthology*, 1485) is unarguable.

From its most visible aspects, the parish plantation school is indeed the most powerful institutional instrument set to provide the system with its working forces. Since the rural South's economy is based on plantation work, it is vital for its leaders to find available, cheap and manageable individuals who can perform the required field work enthusiastically. The parish plantation school seems to be the fitting response to that requirement.

As Grant describes various aspects of the school where he teaches, the reader easily discovers the hidden orientations of the educational institution in the rural South. Grant is the only teacher for the six grades that the community school comprises. Unable to cover the needs of all the school at a time, he very often resorts to so-called stronger students like Irene Cole to teach other younger ones. In such circumstances, Grant is aware that his teaching is unproductive. Emphasizing this aspect, Gaines definitely seeks to present the deficiencies of the black school in the South of which it is utopian to expect qualified crops. Here Gaines lays his finger on one of the system's most efficient subtleties devised to maintain blacks in ignorance. For it is clear that a single teacher cannot come up to the pedagogical and cognitive expectations of a whole school. It is no surprise if students out of these schools fail. Deprived of cognitive abilities, the only place where these dropouts can fit is the field.

By accentuating Grant's denunciations and complaints, Gaines equally sheds light upon an institution that is rather destructive instead of being constructive. The format, function and functioning of school is definitely a well-calculated maneuver to keep blacks in ignorance and ultimately fit them for field work. For, when one's education fails to lead him to such jobs as lawyers, sheriffs, and the like, one is condemned to take positions from which one will obey. In the specific context of the rural south, one who is unable to make it at school often drops out into the fields.

Grant's narration also underscores the ruling class's total disinterest in raising a good and thoughtful black individual. The premises that shelter his school are in a dilapidated condition. Students are seated on old benches in a building that is equally degraded. And in addition to the state of the infrastructure, the school faces a dire shortage of didactic and pedagogical materials.

Because the plantation economy will always require manpower, school is intentionally bereaved of its cognitive skills, and then made to guide kids up to the fields. As Karl Marx says, “every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year” (Marx, 209), the ruling class is perfectly aware of the necessity to create conditions of the reproduction of the working forces. This is the chief role devoted to the plantation school: the reproduction of the working forces and the reproduction of the conditions of the maintenance of the system. Althusser is right as he concludes that “the ISAs permit a society to reproduce its basic social relations, thereby ensuring its continuing existence.”(*The Norton Anthology*, 1477) The idea is not new since Plato’s *Republic* had already focused the idea. He thought that the key to sustaining a just state was controlling the education of its citizens.”(1477)

In the parish plantation context, the ISAs, especially the educational one, yields a specific ideology: labor ideology.

III - The Inspector’s Visit and the Labor Ideology

In the conclusion to his work *Ideology: an Introduction*, Terry Eagleton presents ideology “as an organizing social force which actively constitutes human subjects at the roots of their lived experience and seeks to equip them with forms of value.”(Eagleton, 222-23) In the perspective of Eagleton’s assumption, the inspector’s visit to Grant’s school becomes quite significant. Analyzing the inspector’s attitude as a whole, the reader may observe that he is seeking to equip the black kids “with forms of value and belief relevant to their specific social tasks and to the general reproduction of social order.” Indeed, among all the participants in the construction of this ideological framework of the parish plantation, the inspector’s position and contribution seem to be the most pivotal.

Judging from his schedules and approaches, the inspector appears as an envoy of the dominant class to foster the labor ideology in the black community. With an economy based on plantation work, it is reasonable that every ideological activity be oriented towards the consolidation of the labor ideals consistent with the *base*. That is why, despite his position as the main regulator of school in the sector, he will ignore the fundamentals of school inspection. Actually, instead of focusing on pedagogy, didactic materials, students’ intellectual worth and performance, he concentrates on atypical notions.

When the superintendent starts his examination, his first point is to check students' ability to recite Bible verses. It is true that the South's Christian tradition is a long entrenched one, but the inspector seems to be working to achieve another purpose. Indeed, this exercise is not faith-constructing but rather focuses on the submissive dimension of religion. By verifying students' recitation abilities, the inspector wants to make sure that the young breed of the servile class has also started to inhale the inhibiting spell that their parents and forefathers had swallowed. Whites know that when people's souls are controlled, they are more easily controlled than when rulers seek to subdue them physically.

When indeed the selected student demonstrates her ability to recite the verses, the inspector is satisfied and ironically puts: "You tell your folks Dr. Joseph said they ought to be proud of you." (*Lesson*, 55) And he deliberately ignores the next student's grammatical misconstructions who volunteers to pledge allegiance to the flag. As the designated student speaks, his sentences are rather awkward. But despite the inarticulate English, the inspector "seemed quite satisfied" (*Lesson*, 56) and finally congratulates Grant: 'Higgins, I must compliment you. You have an excellent crop, Higgins. You ought to be proud.'*(Lesson*, 56) It is quite amazing that the inspector shows such a satisfaction despite the students' apparent mediocrity. Perhaps he feels he has reached his objective: Grant's School, like all other black schools, has yielded a good crop for labor. Intellectually unpromising, these kids have no future except turning out as field hands.

The inspector's next point is hygiene and nutrition. His insistence on hygiene and nutrition unveils whites' true understandings of the role of blacks in the rural South. It is noticeable that the labor ideology of slavery has survived till the 1940s. The master often saw blacks as no more than work animals to be fed and treated just for the purpose of the farm work. In such perspectives, insistence was often laid on calorific and energy-generating nutrition (such as pork and beans) to keep field hands strong and productive. Since sick slaves were unproductive, slave owners saw to it that their slaves were well fed and well taken care of. With the inspector, Gaines captures this frame in whites' labor ideology. The inspector's lecture focuses on the importance of hygiene and nutrition. He advises the kids to eat beans, pork and potatoes, which are all energy yielding food items. The stakes involved in such a diet is purely ideological: since the black children are "fated" to end up as field hands, it would not be unreasonable to start guiding them towards the most profit yielding habits. At the end of his lecture, the superintendent releases a conclusion that confirms his role as an ideological agent. Grant recalls it as follows: "hard work was good for the young body.

Picking cotton, gathering potatoes, pulling onions, working in the garden – all that was good exercise for a growing boy or girl.” (*Lesson*, 56)

The labor ideology becomes quite unarguable as one senses that the inspector would not advise the same type of nutrition to white students because they are not expected to make use of their physical strength in the future. So while the inspector’s focus might be laid on mnemonic and intelligence-assessing activities in white schools, his emphasis shifts to morphological and physical supervision.

It is definitely with the inspector’s corporal inspection of the kids that the connection of his visit with slavery practices and the labor ideology is more perceptible. In a humiliating way, the inspector asks Grant’s students to open their mouths so he can control their sanity: “Open wide, say ‘Ahhh’ – and he would have the poor little children spreading out their lips as far as they could while he peered into their mouths.” (*Lesson*, 56) Even if this activity might be part of the inspector’s set of prerogatives (because he is the parish’s first responsible for students’ education which involves an integral development, but it is conducted with little respect to the kids’ human dignity. In their current form, the inspector’s attitudes recall the auction block practices where students were exposed and inspected like animals before they were sold or bought. Grant denounces the dehumanizing aspect in the inspector’s attitudes as he compares them to attitudes applied to horses and cattle being purchased by cattlemen (*Lesson*, 56).

With such practices the inspector absolutely poses as an envoy of a regime which seeks to perpetuate its domination and exploitation of the black community. It is a well-calculated tactic that targets the young breed with insidious ideological missions, because blacks kids are the ones upon whom depends the perpetuation of the plantation economy.

Marx’s statement in *The Communist Manifesto* that “the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production” (Marx, 16) is also true with the parish plantation. Although St Raphael parish is not a modern capitalistic society, the attempt to renew the instruments of productions together with the relations of production still exists. Since production in the rural south of the 1940s is largely manual, an enormous investment is consented in human conditioning. Even if most ruling class members act to that end, the most outstanding figure who incarnates that ideology is the inspector. There is definitely an ideological agenda behind the inspector’s visit to Grant’s school as one scrutinizes his practices.

Conclusion

Because *A Lesson Before Dying* depicts a society where class antagonism, materialist cupidity, exploitation of working classes and instruments for consolidating socio-economic power exist, it can be catalogued as a Marxist work. With *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines denounces the camouflaged capitalistic practices of the 1940s that are effected at the expense of blacks in the South. Under an imperceptible rugged capitalism, blacks like Jefferson undergo the worst type of injustices: incarcerations, executions, deprivations....

Jefferson's story is just the author's pretense to lay bare the cruelty of a southern ruling class over a helpless working class, an alibi to disclose the power of the Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses in controlling ruled people, and especially, an opportunity to reveal that in the rural south of the 1940s, the plantation economy is maintained by a specific ideology: the labor ideology.

Above all, *A Lesson Before Dying* shows, as Marx said in the *Communist Manifesto*, that society (a capitalist society) is split up "into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – Bourgeoisie and Proletariat." (Marx, 15) In the plantation parish, landowners and local officials at the head of institutions represent the bourgeoisie, while the black community represents the proletariat.

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