Writing for Life:
“Jefferson’s Diary” as Transformative Text in
Ernest J. Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*

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We all know – at least intellectually – that we are going to die. The difference is being told, “Okay, it’s tomorrow at 10 a.m.” How do you react to that? How do you face it? That, it seems, to me, is the ultimate test of life.

– Ernest J. Gaines

In *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) Ernest J. Gaines extends the theme of manhood, a motif present in each of his seven works of fiction, through the inclusion of “Jefferson’s Diary” (chapter twenty-nine), the most critical chapter in the novel. The diary is the private notebook that Jefferson, the plantation worker condemned to death by an all-white jury for a crime he didn’t commit, keeps at the urging of Grant Wiggins, the plantation school teacher and the novel’s narrator. At the end of chapter twenty-eight, Gaines prepares the reader for the abrupt shift in language from standard, conventional English to the phonetic vernacular of Jefferson’s speech by extending a dialogue between the two men. Jefferson’s torrent of questions not only illustrates the frustration he carries as the recipient of an unjust penal system, they also speak to the issue of paternal discord. As the ritual of waiting for the execution becomes more pronounced, Grant, at the close of this chapter, empathizes with Jefferson’s plight, telling him, “I wish I knew what to do” (223).

In a final exchange with Grant, before the reader is introduced to the notebook, Jefferson bemoans the expectations from the community that he assume the psychological bearing of everyone who sees him as the victim. “Y’all asking a lot, Mr. Wiggins, from a poor old nigger who never had nothing” (222). He reiterates that he is “the one got to do everything … Me, Mr. Wiggins. This old stumbling nigger. Y’all axe a lot, Mr. Wiggins” (223-224). Jefferson’s burdens to the community become heavier than the plight of his circumstances.

He internalizes his position as the “chosen one,” the single person in the community whose task it is to sustain everyone’s strength and integrity, including white members of the community. From twenty-one years of near-invisibility, Jefferson now becomes the most visible resident in the community. His struggle, notes Mary Ellen Doyle, is a psychological burden and a difficult task made more complicated because he must as-
sume this new role “in the face of raw, southern justice.” In “Jefferson’s Diary,” Gaines suggests that because Jefferson internalizes white racism without having an external venue in which he can self-express, he also relinquishes an exterior display of masculinity and accepts, instead, labels assigned him.

At the trial where Jefferson is proclaimed guilty, he sits stoically as the defense attorney recounts the words of the dying white shopkeeper. Here is the novel’s first, direct reference to Jefferson’s masculinity: “The old man continued to call: Boy? Boy? Boy?” (5). Gaines asserts that black men are not only fighting a majority social power that so often deems them insignificant and less than human; they are fighting for the right to be recognized as men in the larger society:

In reading so much about why young black men are in prison today, so many are fighting over their manhood in the black community … So much of it is our psyche: “I’ve got to be a man, I’ve got to be a man, I’ve got to be a man.” And of course, our mothers, when we’re born, it’s “my little man.” And we want him to be a better person than his father. “You’re the man. You’re the man. You’re the man of the house.”

Long before Jefferson mimics the antics of an animal by kneeling on his cell floor and snorting like a hog, the defense attorney disparages him by referring to him as a “thing” and a “fool”:

Gentlemen of the jury, look at this boy. I almost said man, but I can’t say man. Oh, sure he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this — a man? No. Not I. I would call it a boy and a fool. A fool is not aware of right and wrong. A fool does what others tell him to do. A fool got into that automobile. A man with a modicum of intelligence would have seen that those racketeers meant no good. But not a fool. (7)

The defense attorney continues his humiliation of Jefferson:

A fool got into that automobile. A fool rode to the grocery store. A fool stood by and watched this happen, not having
the sense to run ... [W]hat 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. That is what you see here. (7)

In the span of a few agonizing minutes before the entire community, Jefferson is publicly dehumanized. Gaines’s construct of Jefferson as a semi-illiterate field hand is significant, because it presents Jefferson the opportunity to rise above the words of the defense attorney and teach himself and others about dignity, self-respect, strength, and integrity. His intellectual limitations do not negate the knowledge of his own humanity. As he faces death he also defends his right to be recognized as a human even though he, too, sees little value in himself. Jefferson speaks compassionately about his own humanity. He thinks so little of himself until he had come to believe that he was a “nobody.” “I’m youman [human], Mr. Wiggins. But nobody didn’t know that ‘fore now ... [Y]ou never thought I was nothing else. I didn’t neither. Thought I was doing what the Lord had put me on this earth to do” (224). Jefferson’s mandate from Grant, to die with dignity, is a monumental request, and as he contemplates the weight of the task, he declares the overwhelming burden of the challenge and questions the wisdom of Grant’s appeal, using the biblical analogy of Jesus on the cross to underscore his point:

Me, Mr. Wiggins. Me. Me to take the cross. Your cross, nannan’s cross, my own cross ... [W]ho ever car’d my cross, Mr. Wiggins? My mama? My daddy? They dropped me when I was nothing. Still don’t know where they at this minute. I went in the field when I was six, driving that old water cart. I done pulled that cotton sack, I done cut cane, swing that ax, chop ditch banks, since I was six. (224)

Grant’s flawed notion that Jefferson is “more a man” than he, because Jefferson acknowledges his fate, contrasts the condemned man’s uncertainty of the pain and the process of the upcoming execution. In the following exchange between the two men, Grant acknowledges that he has no answers regarding the upcoming execution, using the backdrop of education and his position as a teacher to support his lack of any real knowledge of the ominous action:
“What it go’n feel like, Mr. Wiggins?”
I shook my head. I felt my eyes burning.
“I hope it ain long.”
“It’s not long, Jefferson,” I said.
“How you know, Mr. Wiggins?”
“I read it.” (225)

The significance of Jefferson’s comment, at the close of chapter twenty-eight, that he is “all right” (225) serves a dual purpose. It shows him to be in the preliminary stage of owning the consequences of his actions as well as introduces the reader to “Jefferson’s Diary,” at nine pages, the most compact chapter in the novel.

Written in the dialect of the 1940s, southern Louisiana region, “Jefferson’s Diary” shows that while language can be used to construct reality, it can also be used to deconstruct and redefine it. Jefferson uses words to acknowledge his humanity, reconstruct his identity, and position himself as a community hero. Before he begins writing in the notebook he constructs a narrative chain extending back to his childhood to situate himself within a historical framework of his childhood and life on the plantation. He recounts that he was “Cuss for nothing. Beat for nothing … [G]rinned to get by. Everybody thought that’s how it was s’pose to be” (224). The declaration positions the reader for Jefferson’s journey of conversion from boy to man.

At the trial his insignificance is collectively assumed by the system that condemns him to death. Much like the residents of the community who have come to witness the outcome of the trial, he is a quiet observer and does not speak for himself. He is not permitted to speak on his own behalf once he has been pronounced guilty. Grant’s request for him to keep a notebook of his thoughts – and Jefferson’s acceptance of the appeal – signals the first time Jefferson has the opportunity to alter the public image and adopt an identity independent of the racist system which proclaims him sub-human.

By substituting a choice to speak with an opportunity to engage in written discourse, Grant gives Jefferson an opportunity to reclaim his public persona. The occasion also gives him the encouragement to tell his story in his own voice and the chance to articulate the history of his life and the events leading to his incarceration. The journal not only presents a mental challenge for Jefferson: it is a profoundly new experience for him, because, as he claims in the journal’s opening entry, he has never been asked to perform a task outside the boundaries of working on the
plantation. In the community of field workers his identity is rooted in the performance of menial labor.

As a plantation worker, his most enduring trait is the ability to act on command. He is, notes Gaines, intellectually restricted, having “limited education and a limited vocabulary. Everything about him was limited.” Gaines further maintains that because of Jefferson’s mental limitations, he, Jefferson, must claim himself through his own voice. Gaines says:

[W]e don’t know too much about him. We are getting some information through Grant, but we don’t know enough about him … So what I thought [to give Jefferson] is an entire chapter devoted to his thinking … [L]et him tell the story. Let him tell it, and let him tell it in his own way … I wanted him to do it in the only way that was possible for him to do it.4

The trajectory of “Jefferson’s Diary” moves from Jefferson’s sense of invisibility to a man who gradually becomes aware of his legacy and obligation, not only to himself but to the community as well. Following the jury’s declaration of guilt, Jefferson’s public persona intensifies. The image, however, fails to capture Jefferson’s true self. Gaines further asserts that up to the point of the diary the reader knows very little about Jefferson and is therefore left to make assumptions about him:

We hear about how everyone feels about Jefferson. We hear how Aunt Emma feels, we hear how Tante Lou feels, we hear how the sheriff feels, we hear how Grant feels, and we even hear how the children feel. But we never hear how Jefferson feels … We never hear Jefferson’s voice.5

In writing the novel Gaines contends that he felt that the reader “had to know him [Jefferson] better. Once I decided he would be executed, I knew since he would not reveal his thoughts to someone; still, in some way, he had to give the reader some information.”6 Jefferson, of course, is “barely literate … He was barely able to write his elementary school assignments. But now, with his pencil and notebook, he tries to define his humanity …”7 Jefferson does not know, however, even the basics of putting words on paper. His dilemma is great, but his determination is greater. Gaines summarizes the condemned man’s confusion:
He does not know whether to write above the lines or across the lines, so he does both. He does not erase. He does not capitalize. He uses no punctuation marks. He writes what comes into his mind. He writes at night when he has light, because he does not want others to see him doing so during the day. He writes the night before his execution because the sheriff promises him that he can have all the light he wants on his last night.

While the opening passage of the diary informs the reader of Jefferson’s limited exposure to written communication, it also represents his first attempt to convey meaningful thought outside the defense attorney’s description and the community’s perspective of him. The writing also suggests that he may have been an auditory learner in school as indicated by the correct spelling of some of the minor words in the notebook. The challenge he faces is daunting, however, and he admits his dilemma in the diary’s opening line: “i dont know what to rite … i dont know what to put on paper cause i ain never rote a letar in all my life cause nanan use to get chirren to rite her letar and read her letar for her not me …” (226). The first presentation of Jefferson’s voice shows an earnest attempt at self-expression. Despite the poor grammar, phonetic spelling, and errors in punctuation, the passage testifies to his efforts to fulfill a request, but it also shows his willingness to begin an earnest examination of himself. Although his statements lack thematic unification, the stream-of-consciousness writing highlights a conscientious ability to separate individual thought as evidenced by the multiple divisions throughout the journal. This level of writing suggests that he carries a myriad of emotions regarding himself, the community, and the oppressive system in which he finds himself.

As the opening entries suggest, his initial concerns center on God’s benevolence as he faces death. To Jefferson, God is unjust for “messing wit po folks who aint never done nothin but try an do all they kno how to serv him” (227). According to him “the lord just work for wite folk cause ever sens i wasin nothin but a little boy i been on my on haulin water to the fiel on that ol water cart wit all them dime buckets an that dipper” (228). In his continued stream-of-consciousness writing, he injects the voice and antics of “Boo,” one of the plantation’s farm workers, who keeps “blasfemin the lord” as he [Boo] waits in the hot sun beneath a shade tree for Jefferson’s water-cart delivery: “how com he dont giv a man a little breeze if he so merciful” (228).
The entry’s strong ending not only shows that Jefferson is aware of God’s power, but he also feels compelled to include – and thus ingest – Boo’s belief that God “don’t love nobody but wite folks cause you they god not mine” (228). Jefferson’s understanding of the politics of racial separation and racial consciousness is acute. Long before he is accused of the crime for which he has been found guilty, he recognizes a system of racial hierarchy that exists on the plantation. Writing in the notebook gives him a sense of power and introspection.

Jefferson’s reference to God suggests that he and Boo, two men of similar mental capacities, share parallel beliefs about God, but Boo has the temerity to publicly expose his beliefs while Jefferson is left to transfer the memory of the blasphemy onto the pages of his notebook. As Jefferson questions the righteousness and mercifulness of God, he momentarily removes himself from the entries and directs an angry inquisition to God about His mercilessness. Instead of “messin wit” him, Jefferson wants to know, “how come he dont come here an take way people like them matin brothers on the st charl river” (227).

In his final condemnation of God’s lack of goodness and mercy in the lives of black people, he projects, vicariously, through Boo’s rant, that “no niger aint got no god” (228) – that this, too, is the way he feels. Boo, whom Jefferson allows to subconsciously “speak” for him in the journal, is, in Jefferson’s view, also a son of the plantation because he “always boght us [the children in the quarters] candy an cake” (228). In allowing Boo to “speak,” in Jefferson’s diary, Gaines employs what is called “reported speech,” which occurs when speech is reported by someone else. Boo’s status, like Jefferson’s, is small in comparison to the larger, overall contribution to and distribution of labor on the plantation. Both men, however, believe that they contribute to the welfare of the workers on the plantation however minuscule their services are in comparison to the larger pool of manual labor.

In Jefferson’s configuration of God’s lack of benevolence, he compares his imminent death with God’s disapproval of him – and thus all poor blacks who have done “all they know how to serv him” (227). God’s love of whites, in Jefferson’s perspective, is greater than His love of the socially and economically disenfranchised who honor, worship, and devote their lives to Him. Even though Jefferson questions God’s mercy he writes from the perspective of a man who has experienced the ritual of church services and has been in the company of devout Christian believers. His view of reality is not seen exclusively through the prism of justice versus injustice but through the reality of the lives of the residents on the
planted whose meager existence parallels his life. Jefferson’s blackness automatically declares him guilty. His rant against God contrasts with the religious deportment of Reverend Ambrose, the plantation preacher who “christened babies, baptized youths, visited those who were ill, counseled those who had trouble, preached, and buried the dead” (101). The theme of white and black is never more evident than in Grant’s observation of the racial injustice of Jefferson’s sentence:

> Twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. Justice? … [T]hey sentence you to death because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, with no proof that you had anything at all to do with the crime other than being there when it happened. Yet six months later they come and unlock your cage and tell you, We, us, white folks all, have decided it’s time for you to die, because this is the convenient date and time. (157-158)

While Grant must learn to temper his resistance to the judicial edict, Reverend Ambrose’s primary objective is for Jefferson to become more accepting of his fate by allowing God into his life.

An expose of theological differences and a clash between central figures are signature motifs in Gaines’s canon. The religious dispute that eight-year-old James witnesses between the young scholar and the older, lay preacher in “The Sky is Gray” (1963), for example, parallels the psychological beliefs that Jefferson shares with Reverend Ambrose, the plantation’s veteran preacher. Reverend Phillip Martin, the charismatic and politically active preacher in Gaines’s In My Father’s House (1978), brings an old-school political and religious agenda to the younger generation of activists in the community who see political protests and staid religious doctrines running counter to their contemporary beliefs.

Reverend Ambrose’s approach to converting Jefferson rests in his ability to convince the condemned man that his salvation depends solely in his belief that there exists a higher being who will “save” his soul before he meets his ultimate fate. He tells Grant that Jefferson “needs God in that cell and not that sin box [the small radio that Grant gives Jefferson]” (181). By questioning God’s lack of mercy for him and any notions of salvation, however, Jefferson shows that not only does he possess the mental capacity to formulate judgments about his fate and his connection to a higher being. He has, according to Herman Beavers, the “resources needed to meet death.”
As Jefferson struggles with a multitude of emotions, reflecting upon his abandonment at birth underscores his effort to move forward. Just like Proctor Lewis, the nineteen-year-old jailed man in “Three Men” (*Bloodline*, 1968), Jefferson’s abandonment by his parents is a great source of pain. It reinforces his sense of “nothingness” and deprives him of the emotional strength he needs to help him differentiate between the concept of love and the ethics of work. Gaines theorizes on the legacy of slavery in relationship to the psychological disconnect between fathers and sons:

Fathers and sons were brought here in chains and then separated on the [slave] auction block … I don’t think that they’ve made a connection since. Too often our fathers cannot help the sons. African American fathers do not send us [black people] to war. They’re very seldom our judges when we’re standing at trial … They don’t represent us when we’re in the courtroom. We often blame him without realizing that he’s never been given that opportunity to defend us … [W]hen it comes to defending our families, our children, our wives, some way or another the white man makes all of those decisions, and that separates father and son.

The parental separation which Jefferson feels is further evident as he moves closer to his own emotional balance, and in a rare declaration he admits to Grant a fear of affirmation:

mr wigin i just feel like tellin you i like you but i dont know how to say this cause i aint never say it to anybody befor an nobody aint never say it to me i kno i care for nanan but i dont kno if love is care cause cutting wood and haulin water and things like that i dont know if thats love or jus work to do an you say thats love but you say you know i got mo an jus that to say an when i lay ther at nite and cant sleep i try an think what you mean i got mo cause i aint done this much thinkin and this much writin in all my life befor. (228-229)

Jefferson’s words show that even though he struggles with the concept of emotional love versus the physical expression of love, he tries to reconcile
how each complements the other. At Grant’s request that he continue to go “deep inside” he represses a show of affection for Grant but acknowledges his affection for his godmother, Miss Emma. He claims to want to “see her one mo time on this earth fore i go,” but he also asks “is that love mr wigin when you want see somebody bad bad” (229). His attachment to his godmother reflects the words of the defense attorney:

Gentlemen of the jury, who would be hurt if you took this life? … [W]hat you see there has been everything to him – everything … [T]ake this away from her, and she has no reason to go on living. We may see him as not much, but he’s her reason for existence. (8)

Jefferson’s ability to question his emotions indicates an earnest attempt to understand his humanity. He continues to debunk the notion that others may view him as “not much” (9) by continuing to “go deep” (228) inside himself.

His emotional breakdown, following a visit by members of the community, startles him, but in the aftermath Jefferson maintains a sense of pride. Crying liberates him from a wealth of pent-up emotions. He is no longer afraid to cry, as he expresses the action numerous times throughout the entry. The children’s dignity and bravery is the catalyst that truly begins Jefferson’s metamorphosis:

mos was brave an spoke an my litle cosin estel even com up an kiss me on the jaw an i coudn hol it back no mo … this was the firs time i cry when they lok that door behind me the very firs time an i jus set on my bunk cryin but not let them see or yer me cause i didn want them think rong but i was cryin cause … the peple com to see me caus they hadn never done nothing lik that for me befor. (230-231)

As Grant consistently appeals to Jefferson to continue writing, Jefferson begins to understand his self-worth, his importance to the community, and his place in society. Grant’s desire is for Jefferson to view himself not simply as a black man but as a man whose current circumstance is a result of an unfair judicial system in general and a racist society in particular. As Jefferson forces himself to think, writing in the notebook helps him dismantle white notions of black masculinity and reconstruct
his concept of manhood. Grant continues to nurture and encourage him to say things, as he confesses in the journal, he “aint telin nobody” (226). The diary thus becomes the agent for Jefferson’s evolution from invisible plantation hand to a viable human being. It serves not only as an effective inducement for Grant; it also works in this capacity for the jailers who become unwitting participants in Jefferson’s development.

Writing gives Jefferson a temporary measure of superiority over an oppressive system which deems him incapable of rational thought and behavior. As he writes in the journal, he subtly observes his surroundings, and he quietly studies the character of the men in his environment. From the early stages of writing, he notices the pretentiousness of some of the jailers: “ole clark been coming roun too tryin to act like a youman but i can see in his face he aint no good an i dont even look at him when he ax if im doing all rite and can he git me somthin no i just go on ritin in my tablet” (230). As Jefferson writes he also discerns the deputies’ sincerity. His incarceration gives him the fortitude to accept or deny favors from the jailers.

His dismissal of the jailer’s offer is significant in two respects. First, he consciously engages in a southern code of conduct where blacks are forbidden to look directly into the eyes of white people with whom they speak. Yet, also, by continuing to write in the journal without acknowledging the jailer’s presence, he ignores the jailer and the words he speaks. Jefferson, the invisible black field hand, very subtly controls his personal space according to his own agenda. Continuing to write in the journal is more significant to him than conversing with the jailer. By his own design he subtly dismisses his oppressors while buttressing his own self-esteem. He remains the prisoner in the cell, but he also becomes the gatekeeper of his space. As the theme of black and white is conveyed throughout the diary, the white jailers are now “invisible” to Jefferson. Jefferson, the “thing,” now has presence. He is “seen” by everyone: the jailers, the prisoners, and the community. The journal not only operates as a recorder of his life. It represents a temporary sanctuary from a system of racial oppression, serves as a refuge from the constant thought of his impending death, and comforts him during his most vulnerable moments.

As he continues writing, the racial dynamics at the jail slowly begin to change. His determination to “jus go on ritin” (223) shows a subtle shift in power. The intensity with which Jefferson writes alters the social terrain and, to a small degree, transforms the people upon whom he is dependent. The physical presence of the notebook places him in a position of command over his oppressors, allowing him to quietly negotiate the
boundaries of his circumstances as he constructs his own identity. As the writing reflects his ability to “speak,” his muteness is now replaced by a temporary control of his circumstances. With the closing of each entry in the diary Jefferson slowly moves from victim to survivor. The jailers’ response to Jefferson’s needs is a combination of the guilt they feel in knowing an innocent man is being put to death: but more importantly it is their desire to avoid being demonized in the writing.

Sheriff Guidry, a representative figure of the racist network of southern white law enforcement officials charged with overseeing black prisoners, seeks validation of his righteousness as well as a proper accounting for his deputies’ moral behavior. This notion of white guilt drives him to examine his conscience, because he wants Jefferson’s words to reflect how humane he has been treated under his watch. Sheriff Guidry unknowingly becomes part of Jefferson’s text, and in doing so becomes a participant in – and shares in the victory of – Jefferson’s psychological will to survive. By offering himself as a verbal companion to Jefferson’s words, he unconsciously submerges himself in Jefferson’s power, becoming, ironically, part of a perceived black racial inferiority. Jefferson’s deliberately monotonous responses to the jailers’ offers prevent him from engaging in a lengthy discourse with the sheriff while also respectfully affirming the sheriff’s sense of racial superiority. In jail, Jefferson learns how to direct the path of his existence and peacefully negotiate the terms of his own life:

shef guiry come by after i et an ax me how im doing an i say im doin all right an he ax me he say i aint never pik up yo tablet an look in it an he ax what all i been ritin an i tol him jus things an he say aint he done tret me rite an i tol him yessir an he say ain he done let the chirren an all the peple from the quarter com an vist me jus two days ago and i say yesir an he say good put that down in yo tablet. (223)

In the same passage he includes the sheriff’s final appeal that he be portrayed as “genuine” for providing Jefferson special treatment:

i tret you good all the time you been yer an he say he had to go hom cause he hadn et his super yet but for me to call a depty if i need somthin an he ax me if i want the lite to stay on all nite in case i want rite som mo an i tol him yesir an he say all rite i could have all the lite I want. (223)
The sheriff’s final statement, that Jefferson can have “all the lite” he wants, not only extends one of the chapter’s theme of light versus darkness and black versus white, it contradicts Jefferson’s fate. As the date of the execution approaches, his gradual detachment from life is exposed in the diary’s closing passages. The entries become sparse and the tone more reflective, indicating, for the first time, Jefferson’s acknowledgment of the inappropriate choice he made that led to his incarceration. He concedes that he “ain had no bisnes goin there wit brother an bear cause they aint no good” (223). As the diary’s only reference to the crime, the admission implies that, before the episode at the liquor store which led to Jefferson’s trial and eventual incarceration, he had the capacity to differentiate between right and wrong. But now, as he awaits execution, he has a chance to reflect upon the choice he made.

Equally important in the acknowledgment is the statement “cause they [Brother and Bear] aint no good” (223). The declaration suggests that he separates himself psychologically from the men’s conduct, while agreeing that he is indeed a “good” person who made an improper decision during a vulnerable moment. His use of the active voice implies that he is still responding in present time to the episode even though he has not completely reached the point of fully accepting his imminent death. Writing not only makes Jefferson a cautious soul but also a curious presence in the confines of his restricted space.

While Jefferson’s writing does not conform to the conventions of standard, written English, it is an insightful commentary on human frailties. His initial reluctance to write, born out of a fear of the unknown and lack of literacy skills, is gradually replaced by a subtle indifference and resignation to his fate. His claim that he does not care who reads his words after he is “dead and gone” (230) not only signals the approaching closure of the diary, it also suggests that death will be the ultimate release of any unresolved fears and sorrows. By his own hand, Jefferson creates his own, personal narrative, putting to rest preconceived notions of who and what he is. As Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooten point out in *Porch Talk with Ernest J. Gaines*, Jefferson’s words “alter the alternative version of the stories told about him.” As his words show, he slowly detours from communal attachment, fostered by the perception that he is a mere field hand, to become a writer whose emotional growth becomes stronger each day he confronts his own mortality.

Jefferson’s emotional strength is critically important to his mental survival, and he now claims both as he nears the date of the execution, set by the governor of the state of Louisiana, as “the second Friday
of fear of emotional revelation with Grant to expressing his love to Miss Emma is a critical step in Jefferson’s journey to manhood. Verbally expressing his love and allowing her to embrace him “lon is she want” (231) is a significant statement as he seeks to move forward. The entry is more than an affirmation of his love for his godmother: It testifies that he is indeed aware of the physical toll his incarceration has taken upon her:

> when they brot me in the room an i seen nanan at the table
> i seen how ole she look an how tied she look an i tol her
> i love her an i tol her i was strong an she jus look ole and
> tied an pull me to her an kiss me an it was the firs time she
> never done that an it felt good an i let her hold me lon is she
> want cause you [Grant] say it was good for her. (231)

Even though Jefferson feels the power between them, he does not readily admit that his godmother’s embrace is “good for him,” too. Recognizing the impact of his circumstances upon her, he concludes the passage by affirming his strength while unconsciously noting that she does not need to return to the jail: “i was strong an she didn need to come back no mo cause i was strong an she jus set ther wit her eyes most shet like she want to go to sleep lookin at me all the time til reven and mis lou have to hep her up an take her back home” (231).

As he moves into the final hours he writes of his desire to “see the sun one mo time” (232). The consistent use of the word “sun” symbolizes the diminishing days of his life, and as he notices the brightness of the sun, “the moon out there” (233) and the “leves on the tree” (233), he also comes to terms with the fact that despite how he feels about death and God and the unfairness of his life, he is going to die, and will “sleep a long time after tomoro … aint gon see no mo leves after tomoro” (233). His observations are an acknowledgment of his separation from God’s creations and an admission that he is ready to enter a different sphere. From his former position as a plantation worker to his present status as the jailhouse scribe, writing places him outside the boundaries of his fears and allows him to move, as Herman Beavers notes, “into a space where he ponders the meaning of death.”

Jefferson’s movement into a different, psychological place assumes a critical urgency as he returns full circle to the historical narrative of his
life. He revisits his previous claim of working as the plantation’s water boy, where he only “rode the cart” (234). As he faces death, he can now set forth his claim to manhood, and in doing so dispel the notion of who he used to be (a water boy) and what he has been called: a hog, a fool, and a “thing.” His assertion that he has “to be a man an set in a cher” dismantles his earlier claim of being “nothing else” (234). His declaration of intent does not go unnoticed by Grant, who observes, during a pensive moment, that Jefferson now stands “big and tall, and not stooped as he had been in chains” (225). As Jefferson constructs a new identity in the confines of a regulated space, he transfers aspects of his social grounding into written discourse. In the process he redefines his image as merely a “cornered animal” (7) into that of a man who is now ready to stand and make, what Gaines calls, “the ultimate sacrifice.”

Gaines adds: “We all know – at least intellectually – that we are going to die. The difference is being told, ‘Okay, it’s tomorrow at 10 a.m. How do you react to that? How do you face it? That, it seems, to me, is the ultimate test of life.”

Jefferson’s words are not a universal statement about the plight of incarcerated black men. His words are an expression of humility and his ability to recognize and accept the immediacy of death in a community where he is progressively being looked upon as a symbol of change. The muted voice now “speaks” with affection and compassion and reflects upon his immediate surroundings. His words, as Mary Ellen Doyle notes, “express puzzlement, fear, hope, and love.” Unpunctuated and free-flowing, Jefferson’s words indicate an emotional urgency lain dormant for years but now, through the act of written discourse, explodes upon the pages of the notebook. Through the power of language, contends Doyle, Jefferson “escapes one prison house, achieves his manhood, and produces a text to guide others.”

In one of the novel’s most essential passages, Grant offers Jefferson a lesson on the myth of white supremacy and Jefferson’s obligation to help dispel the notion. As a reluctant son of the South, a frustrated Grant thrusts his anger upon anyone within his circle. He directs animosity toward Reverend Ambrose for trying to convince him that God is the answer to Jefferson’s plight, and he foists it upon Vivian, Tante Lou, and Miss Emma – who capitalize on his gender and position in the community – to convince Grant that he has the most “knowledge” to carry forth the lessons on manhood. His youth and status as a single man, his former teacher-student association with Jefferson and his convenient
accessibility convince everyone that he is capable of bringing about Jefferson’s “change.”

A lesson about “standing” does as much for Grant as it does for Jefferson. If Jefferson, the incarcerated man, is able to show, as Ed Piacentino claims, the “common humanity that is in us all,” then Grant, the free man, will not, in his own fear of standing up to the powers of a racially oppressive system, be made to show man’s “common humanity.” The semi-illiterate fieldworker is commissioned by the educated teacher not only to teach a lesson to the community on the importance of maintaining dignity in the face of all odds, but also to teach the difference between truth and deception. As Grant has a tall order to fill as the plantation’s “chosen one,” so, too, does Jefferson, whose appointment is equally as challenging. Grant implores Jefferson to make a statement by standing tall:

A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they’re better than anyone else on earth – and that’s a myth. The last thing they ever want to see is a black man stand, and think. … It would destroy their myth. They would no longer have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in. As long as none of us stand, they’re safe … I don’t want them to feel safe with you anymore … I want you to chip away at that myth by standing. (192)

Grant tells Jefferson that he “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 need you much more than you could ever need me” (192-193). In trying to convince Jefferson of his own needs, he tells him that he needs to “know what to do with my life” (193):

I want to run away, but go where and do what? I’m needed here and I know it, but I feel that all I’m doing here is choking myself. I need someone to tell me what to do. I need you to tell me, to show me. I’m no hero; I can just give something small. That’s all I have to offer. It is the only way that we can chip away at that myth. You – can be bigger than anyone you have ever met. (193)
Near the end of his life, Jefferson, forever the dutiful servant, surrenders to Grant’s request that he “chip away at the myth” (192). By disabling the notion of his inferiority, Jefferson, maintains Doyle, is able to elevate himself from a “lowly and unpromising beginning” to a figure of significant acclaim by everyone who discounts his capabilities. With this new status he has the opportunity to emerge as the sainted son of the community. His martyrdom will come, ironically, as a result of the system that oppresses him.

In a symbolic play on words, Gaines captures the ultimate objective of Jefferson’s goal: to be recognized as a man. Throughout the diary, the word “human” is spelled “youman.” The phonetic spelling suggests that Jefferson subconsciously says to himself, as he wishes for the community to declare, “You, Jefferson, are a man.” Conjoined, the words confirm Jefferson’s status as an individual. As the community has served witness to the defense attorney’s pronouncement of Jefferson’s inhumanity, it is particularly important to Jefferson that the community knows that he is indeed a man. By writing his own narrative he rejects the derogatory labels and declares his own identity. Such an action will, in his psyche, cast aside any lingering doubts of him as a “thing,” a “fool,” and an “it.”

In the notebook’s last entry, he directs Grant to “speak” to the community on his behalf: “tell them im strong tell them im a man” (234). His use of the pronoun “them” not only references the people in his emotional circle – his godmother and Tante Lou, specifically – but also those persons who are responsible for proclaiming him guilty and declaring his fate: the all-white jury and, by extension, the entire racist system of injustice. The repetition of “tell them” – within the short span of the statement – signals his strong resolution as well as the profoundness and immediacy of the request.

In singling out Paul for the notebook’s delivery to Grant, the request shows that Jefferson not only trusts the jailer and appreciates his treatment of him as a human being, but he recognizes Paul to be “the only one rond yer kno how to talk like a youman to peple” (230). Jefferson is able to distinguish Paul’s genuine behavior from the pseudo compassion of the other jailers, and in the diary he “speaks” to the men in power regarding their integrity and character, making sure he calls by name the men from whom he feels most alienated: “i kno ole clark an i know you too shef guiry an you mr picho and mr mogan an all the rest of yall i jus never say non of this befor but i kno yall ever las one of yall” (230). Even though Jefferson does not offer a previous assessment of the men’s character, his claim of knowing “ever las one of yall” is not only a denouncement
of the men who oversee his welfare but also an indictment of the racist system in which he finds himself incarcerated. As he has asked Grant to report to the general community that he is a man, it is important that he “calls out,” in writing, the persons whom he knows are racists but are pretending, owing to the circumstances, to be otherwise: “ole clark,” “shef guiry,” “mr picho,” and “mr mogan.” Because he has not heretofore had an opportunity or reason to “say non of this befor” (230), he now utilizes the journal to secure a permanent voice – not only in the community but perhaps in the hearts and minds of the men as well.

As he seeks to return the favor to a community which “hadn never done nothin” (231) for him before their visit to the jail, he unearths the humanity of his own fragmented life. According to Gaines, “Jefferson’s Diary” is the most prominent chapter in the novel, because once you read the diary “it’s uplifted your heart, if you had a heart. He’s uplifted you, and he tells you how he feels. That is the turning point, that little ‘light’ that [James] Joyce speaks of, that epiphany. That brings light to the entire story.” Jefferson, he adds “is not going to be this coward they’ll have to drag. He’s not going to eat a whole gallon of ice cream with a pot spoon. He’s going to eat a little Dixie cup of ice cream. All of these little things elevate him – to salvation, to the uplifting of the soul.” As a narrative about communal bonds, the former water boy, who feels disenfranchised from the larger society, reconstructs himself as a viable member of the community, achieving, in his last hours, what he has been unable to achieve as a free man: a sense of visibility, pride, and integrity.

As the execution date approaches, the diary’s entries assume a fragmented solitude. The reversal from detailed, emotional explication seen earlier in the journal, to short, crisp statements suggests Jefferson’s resignation to his fate. His time on earth is about to expire; so, too, is his thinking at length about himself. In the emotional and physical grips of fear he manages, however, to keep writing in shorter bursts, warning Grant that his “han shakin” (234) but bravely claiming that life is “for the livin an not for me” (234). As he completes the journey to go inside himself, his observations and sensory perceptions become more acute. As he converses with Grant in the cell, he surrenders to the beauty of the scene beyond his window: “So pretty out there … So pretty. I ain’t never seen it so pretty” (225).

His final entries assume a rhythmic, poetic quality, suggesting his emergence from the dark recesses of his psyche to a place of renewal and rebirth:
day breakin
sun comin up
the bird in the tre soun like a blu bird
sky blu blu mr wigin. (234)

His upward gaze suggests a final observation of all that remains of a life he is fated to leave. The design of the cell prevents him from seeing the bird, but it does not prevent him from imagining its color. The repeated emphasis on the color of the sky – “blu blu” – in a single line, implies a distinct meaning of “blue” as the word relates to Jefferson’s expected disposition. He only hears the sounds of the bird, but he is able to “see” beyond his immediate circumstance as he accepts the inevitable. Even though he questions God’s benevolence, he now appreciates the beauty of life and the sights and sounds emanating from His creations: the dawning of day, the distinct call of a bird, the magnificence of the color of the sky. No tone of remorse or regret claims Jefferson’s voice as he notices the “sun comin in the windo cause i can see it splashin on the flo” (226). The diary’s final entries show his unwavering strength and his reconciliation to his fate. Emerging from an attitude of cynicism, low self-esteem, insecurity, and fear, Jefferson now forms a final distinction between preconception and reality, the latter a result of his ability to reach farther into himself than he has ever done or been asked to do. An approaching death becomes Jefferson’s savior more than a sustained life on the plantation.

Jefferson’s diary, maintains Gaines, frames the novel and gives Jefferson the opportunity to not only save himself by the strength of his own words, but also to permit himself to teach others the power of facing one’s fears. Poignantly, accepting his impending death is the only avenue left for him in the journey toward manhood. It is his imminent death, ironically, that gives him the strength to live psychologically unrestricted for the first time in his life. He must continue to write until the appointed day and hour, because the act sustains him and keeps him emotionally alive. “Nothing in his life becomes him,” Doyle argues, “like the leaving of it. … [W]ithout his incarceration that life would have continued to be an aimless trip.”

In bringing the diary to an end, Jefferson may not fully understand the significance of “sincely,” the word with which he closes the journal. But he understands that he uses it not only as a term of finality of a particular action but as an affirmation of endearment. Most importantly, his writing speaks the truth and comes from his heart, and in the circumstances of
his situation, it means that not only is the journal complete, his journey is complete. He has, as the diary indicates, no additional words to share and no need to further extend himself.

While his ultimate goal is to walk to the execution chair with pride and dignity, he also wants to enlarge the significance of this ultimate walk by refusing to speak. Because the history of black men in the South falsely accused of crimes is not a new phenomenon, Gaines maintains that he did not want Jefferson “trying to explain himself just before he was going to be executed. No final words.” In the manner of Jefferson’s muteness at the trial, he is determined to walk to his death with quiet dignity. “That’s how I want to go, Mr. Wiggins. Not a mumbling word” (223). Long after he is “dead and gone” (230) the notebook will perhaps remain his voice.

From the diary’s commencement, where Jefferson proclaims that he “don’t know what to write” (226) to the end of the novel, he is a man on a journey of validation. As Grant’s former student, he is aware that accolades are awarded for academic achievement, and in this regard he seeks recognition for fulfilling the mandate of keeping a notebook. In the preliminary stages of writing in the diary he implores Grant to acknowledge his words: “Mr Wigin you say you like what i got here but you say you stil cant giv me a a jus a b cause you say i aint gone deep in me yet” (228). He believes, early in the writing process, that he has indeed gone deep within himself, not initially understanding, however, the larger significance of the request: the need for self-examination as a way of learning about oneself. Gaines asserts that writing serves a dual purpose: “Writing is finding out things about oneself … and searching in ways to understand yourself better.”

Midway through the journal Jefferson thanks Grant for acknowledging his words, saying, “thank you for sayin im doin b+ work an you know the a aint too far” (229). Jefferson’s insistence that his work receive the highest academic assessment speaks to his long-held desire for validation. He not only needs Grant’s substantiation for himself he needs it, in his final hours, for the community as well. All men, Gaines says, “would like to stand in the sun one day. They need that fifteen minutes of recognition … [A]ll men do.” Jefferson’s diary will remind others that he was more than a man who was executed for a crime he did not commit. He hopes, too, to be remembered as more than a field hand who “git the peple they food an they water on time” (227).

In his journal Jefferson exposes as much of his life on the printed page as he can, and he writes with a great sense of urgency. He must
tell all that he knows of himself and all that he feels about himself. The voices of others – the defense attorney, the judge, the governor, the jailers, and plantation workers – will no longer define him. The journal is the last opportunity for Jefferson to declare his presence in the community. His words – raw, unvarnished, and unpretentious – define his life in the quarters as much as his work ethic defines his labor on the plantation. “We don’t know a man,” Gaines concedes, “until he speaks.”

“Jefferson’s Diary,” Gaines says, “is made up of small things, about the people he [Jefferson] knew and how they affected his life, about insignificant incidents. He thinks about justice and injustice. And he wonders about God. All this is written above and across the lines of his notebook, without capitalization and punctuation.” The writing shows a man’s enduring quest for visibility and recognition. As Jefferson bids Grant “good by” (234), he speaks as a man who now values the importance of his own voice and understands the consequences of an unjust judicial system. As he prepares to make the most important walk in his life, he writes of his fear while also maintaining a strong constitution: “i been shakin an shakin but im gon stay strong i can yer my teefs hitin an i can yer my hart” (223). His pending death serves as a cultural function in the community, and his words are a document of protest against an unjust system of racial oppression. If an element of humor can be found in Jefferson’s voice, it comes during the period of the grand visit by members of the community. His new-found skill of analysis has taught him to be more observant of his surroundings and of the people with whom he comes in contact, whether friend or foe. Following the visit by the schoolchildren, he asks “where all them peple come from” (230). The day room at the jail fills up quickly as he sits and accepts the graciousness of their visit. In the notebook he recalls the visit and the outpouring of support:

here com the ole folks an look like everbody from the quarter was here mis julia an joe an mis haret an ant agnes an mr noman an mis sara an mis lilia an mr harry an mis lea an god kno who all an mr ofal an miss felia wit her beeds an jus prayin an all the people sayin how good i look an lord have merce sweet jesus mr wigin how you got bok yer in that suit that suit look like it half bok siz cause i member mis rita got him that suit way back ten leben yers back an bok babin ther like he kno me. (230)
“Bok,” the plantation’s marble-obsessed manchild, wants to visit Jefferson because, according to Miss Rita, he feels the need to extend his hand in friendship. Like others in the quarters he, too, is affected by Jefferson’s plight. Clearly touched by Bok’s visit, Jefferson writes:

he want say he glad to see me an he want give me one of hiss aggis an me jus lookin at bok shakin my hed an shakin my hed an i cant stop sayin ole bok ole bok ole bok you want give me one o you aggis but ole bok wound turn it loose til mis rita had to tell him let go bok few times an still bok wound turn loose till mis rita pri it out his han and han it to me an bok start babbin’ there til mis rita had to reach out her han for me to give it back to her an she giv it back to bok an bok put it back in his pocket … ole bok lookin way over yonder kep rattlin the marbles in his pocket … til he fond the littles one he had in his pocket an han me that. (231)

Not only does Jefferson’s perspective on the visit bring a light-hearted aspect to a somber mood, the tale serves a more significant purpose. Miss Rita “reaching out her hand” symbolizes how the community extends itself to residents, and Bok’s offering of the marble symbolizes how the community’s members “give back” in times of need. More significantly, however, the scene represents the power of a community’s investment in one of its own.

Although Grant’s bond with Jefferson greatly affects him and is critically significant to his own growth as a man, he does not possess the strength or courage to attend the execution. When he returns to the children at the plantation school in the quarters he is visibly distraught but finds “his students are waiting, standing at attention, their shoulders back, heads high, to hear of the execution.”27 Although the children are greatly saddened at Jefferson’s fate, they assume the identical posture that Jefferson manages during the moments before his execution. They are strong, brave, and resolute. Jefferson’s death is the season’s lesson. A Lesson Before Dying, contends Gaines, “is not whether Jefferson is innocent or guilty but how he feels about himself at the end.”28 As Grant becomes the custodian of Jefferson’s written narrative, Jefferson’s diary will, one hopes, occupy a place of historical significance in the community and serve as a document to help others understand their own lives.
NOTES

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid., p.61.
8 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p.224.
17 Piacentino (2004).
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Gaines (2005: 61).
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., p.60.

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