

## **The Politics of Social Norms in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying***

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### **Abstract**

This paper unveils the arbitrariness of social norms in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. It shows the extent to which social norms contribute to the marginalization, devaluation and dehumanization of colored people by shedding light on the logic behind social regulation in the novel under study. Marxist criticism used for analyzing the literary text enabled us to find out that Whites set up arbitrary social norms to blame and punish Blacks for preventing them from entering into competition with them. Consequently, social norms in *A Lesson Before Dying* can be considered as tricks or strategies used by Whites to deny Blacks of social privileges, rights and even human values. The paper also reveals Blacks' ambivalent reactions to these arbitrary social norms.

**Keywords** : Ideology, marginalization, norm, race, supremacy.

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#### **Résumé**

Cet article dévoile le caractère arbitraire des normes sociales dans *A Lesson Before Dying* d'Ernest Gaines. Il montre à quel point ces normes contribuent à la marginalisation, à la dévaluation et à la déshumanisation des Noirs tout en mettant en lumière la logique de la régulation sociale dans le roman soumis à notre étude. La critique marxiste utilisée pour mener notre réflexion a permis de découvrir que les Blancs établissent des normes sociales arbitraires pour blâmer et punir les personnes de couleurs afin de les empêcher de leur faire la concurrence. Par conséquent, les normes sociales dans *A Lesson Before Dying* peuvent être considérées comme des astuces ou stratégies pour refuser les privilèges sociaux, les droits et les valeurs humaines aux Noirs. L'article révèle également la réaction ambivalente des Noirs face aux normes sociales arbitraires.

**Mots clés** : Idéologie, marginalisation, norme, race, suprématie.

## **Introduction**

Considered as the customs, traditions, standards, rules, values, fashions, and all other criteria of conduct which are standardised as a consequence of the contact of individuals (M. Sherif, 1936, p. 3), social norms are observable in every society. Not only do they prescribe how people should behave, but they also shape what attitudes all individuals should have in social interaction. In all societies, people internalize them in the process of socialization. In doing so, social norms are very significant in regulating social life. However, when they are established arbitrarily, these norms often favor some individuals over others. In other words, they can endow a social group with power and privileges to the detriment of another one. Consequently, to monopolize power in society, a social group can intentionally set up rules in order to discriminate or deprive another social group of rights and values. Such a situation is noticeable in many societies where differences between people result in social inequality. These differences range from race, language, gender to religion and stand as pillars used by people to negotiate and monopolize power in society. They succeed in doing so by setting up arbitrary social norms that favor a given social group to the detriment of another one. This politics of social norms has been the source of inspiration for many African American writers, who portray the marginalization and the devaluation of colored people in their literary works. In their fictional works, they portray the impact of unfair social rules on the lives of minority groups.

Ernest Gaines, through his novel *A Lesson Before Dying*, reflects upon how social norms play a part in depriving Blacks of values, rights and privileges. In this novel, Gaines presents the condition of Jefferson, a young African American, who is sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit. During his trial, because of his skin color, his humanity and dignity are denied by the white lawyer who had to defend him. Grant Wiggins, a black teacher, is asked by Jefferson's godmother to convince and encourage him to die with dignity in order to assert Blacks' humanity. In addition to the dehumanization of the main character, the other black characters are deprived of social rights and privileges. From this story, it is clear that social norms contribute to the devaluation and marginalization of Blacks in many ways. In Gaines's text, these norms are the causes of Blacks' failure to integrate themselves in their multiracial society because Whites are the ones who

make profit from these rules that are racist. How does Gaines account for the ideology of social norms in his novel? How do Jefferson and Grant Wiggins react to social norms that devalue the black community in *A Lesson Before Dying*?

To answer these questions, our article will be devoted to the analysis of the politics of social norms in the novel under study. Our analyses will be focused on Marxist criticism. According to Karl Marx, the economic means of production within a society both engenders and controls all human institutions and ideologies (C. E. Bressler, 1999, p.193). In other words, for the German philosopher, social and economic conditions directly influence how and what people believe and value. In this perspective, when there are different social groups in a society, one will try to have power over the others by making arbitrary decisions to persecute them in order to exercise supremacy. This is the reason why the ideal of Marxism is to transform society from a place of hatred and conflict because of class struggle into a classless society in which all citizens have access to wealth, opportunities and social resources. Thus, concepts such as ideology, superstructure, hegemony and rebellion will be of paramount importance in our analyses. This paper falls into two sections. The first one unveils the ideology of social norms by shedding light on the logic behind social norms and the second assesses Jefferson and Grant Wiggins's reaction to arbitrary social norms.

### **1. Unveiling the Logic behind Social Norms in Gaines's Novel**

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, social norms not only create power imbalances between Whites and Blacks, but they also contribute to Blacks' exclusion and marginalization. These norms can be summed up to the norm of whiteness since they confer power to all individuals who have a white skin color to express superiority over Blacks. As a matter of fact, there is a norm that prevents Blacks from entering a white person's house through the front door; they rather have to enter through the back door. Grant Wiggins considers this social rule as a norm established to humiliate Blacks and make them feel inferior. This is the reason why he is always reluctant about going to Mr. Henri Pichot's house on Miss Emma's demand. He does not want to experience the feelings of inferiority and humiliation when he is compelled to enter a white person's house through the back door. For example, after a visit at Mr. Henri Pichot's house, he states :

I was hungry. I hadn't eaten anything but a sandwich since breakfast. But I would not eat at Henri Pichot's kitchen table. I had come through that back door against my will, and it seemed that he and the sheriff were doing everything they could to humiliate me and even more by making me wait on them. (p. 46)

Grant Wiggins feels humiliated because behind the social norm that compels colored people to always enter a white person's house through the back door, it is clear that Whites overtly inferiorize Blacks. Entering a house through the back door implies that the person is worthless; he is inferior to the person who owns the house. For Mr. Pichot and the other Whites, allowing Blacks to enter their houses through the front door will make Blacks feel as if they were equal to them. It is this idea of equality that they reject. For Grant Wiggins, this social norm is unjust and classes colored people into "inferior" human beings. Therefore, to avoid developing feelings of worthlessness, he decides not to be in contact with white people. He prefers staying in the black community where his value is recognized by the racial group to which he belongs.

Moreover, as far as education is concerned, there is a norm that makes white students superior to black students. Indeed, in the novel under study, the education system prioritizes white students. They are given more chances to succeed at school. They have all the books and equipment required to perform well at school. On the contrary, black schools are devoid of documents. Black teachers and students work under difficult conditions. This contrast reveals that Whites are unwilling to let black children make profit from the advantages of education. They expect Blacks to be uneducated so that they keep on dominating them without facing any rebellion. So, the unavailability of books in black schools can be perceived as a means to reduce Blacks' opportunities to be literate. Grant Wiggins, a teacher in the black community, complains about this situation when he declares :

My desk was a table used as a collection table by the church on Sundays, and also used for the service of the Holy Sacrament on the fourth Sunday of each month. My students' desks were the benches upon which their parents and grandparents sat during church meeting. The students either got down on their knees and used the benches as desks to write upon. (p. 39)

From the above passage, it is obvious that Whites control all social institutions and are careless about Blacks' education. They are rather interested in giving more opportunities to white students so that they can perpetuate the cycle of their dominance over Blacks. This intention

explains why Dr. Joseph, the white superintendent who visits Jefferson's classes, does not care about the obstacles that the black teacher faces in his job. During his visits in the black school, he rather stands as a person whose objective is just to assess the quality of education in black schools. From Dr. Joseph's attitude, we can deduce that Whites are the ones who set up the norm of education in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Furthermore, a social norm compels Blacks to only have access to public places which are inferior to places frequented by Whites. In fact, the norm of segregation in Bayonne divides society into two corners, which are diametrically opposed. Places reserved for Whites are nice and well built. However, areas attributed to Blacks are always worse compared to the ones reserved for Whites. From this norm that gives all places of quality to Whites, we can conclude that segregation in Bayonne aims at classing citizens into first-class citizens and second-class citizens according to their skin color. Consequently, Blacks' opportunities to have good public facilities are very limited. Grant Wiggins sheds light on the politics of segregation in the following passage:

There, instead of houses and trees, there were fishing wharves, boat docks, nightclubs, and restaurants for whites. There were one or two night clubs for colored, but they were not very good [...] There was a catholic church uptown for whites; a catholic church back of town for colored. There was a white movie theater uptown; a colored movie theater back of town. There were two elementary schools uptown, one catholic, one public, for whites; and the same back of town for colored. (p.25)

From this passage, we notice that public places reserved for Whites are all located "uptown" whereas the ones attributed to colored people are located in the "back of town". Such a separation shows that public places are built for Whites first. Blacks cannot have a place of their own until Whites have theirs. Thus, in the process of separating Whites and Blacks through segregation, we perceive a "Whites first" ideology. Therefore, behind the idea of separating Whites and Blacks in society, there is a logic of serving Whites first and giving them better places and opportunities. So, skin color is the norm that determines in which corner of the town an individual should live. Leslie Tischauser sheds light on the meaning of these segregation laws also known as Jim Crow laws when she notes :

They [Jim Crow laws] referred to an entire way of life. It stood for an entire culture based on violence, racism, and fear that affected the life of every African American living in the South. In the early Jim Crow decades (1880–1900) of the nineteenth century, white mobs lynched hundreds of African Americans, and the black community saw all of the political, legal, and citizenship rights it had gained since the Civil War (1861–65) disappear. For whites Jim Crow meant fun, laughter, and amusement. In African American homes the name meant humiliation, degradation, and cowardice. (L.V. Tischauser, 2012, p. 12)

Besides, there is a norm that classes people into “superior” and “inferior” human beings on the basis of their skin color. In other words, relations between characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* is dominated by racial hierarchy. Those who have a white skin color overtly consider themselves superior to those who have a black skin color. This standard is also noticeable within the black community where people who have a fair skin complexion claim superiority over those whose skin color is black. Thus, in this society portrayed by Gaines, race stands as the barometer used to “measure” a person’s superiority. Whatever the qualities or values of a person, if he or she does not have a white skin color, society does not praise his or her quality. In other words, qualities and values cannot be associated with the black skin color. Such a reality is perceptible through the following conversation between Grant Wiggins and a Creole :

“Do you feel superior to me?” I asked him.

“Of course”, he said. Don’t be a damned fool. I am superior to you. I am superior to any man blacker than me.”

“Is that why you hate me?” I asked (p. 65)

As we can notice, the criterion of superiority is the white skin color, which is a physical trait. This norm of superiority that prevails in society shapes social relations between Whites and Blacks. Despite its arbitrary characteristic, Whites and colored people adhere to its principles. Since the norm of superiority is not focused on an objective criterion, it is possible to argue that behind the idea of Whites’ superiority over Blacks, Whites intend to monopolize all social privileges. Joe Feagin perceives the ideology of Whites’ superiority over Blacks when he writes: “In societies characterized by racial hierarchies, racial frames are constructed from the ideological justifications, processes, procedures, and institutions that define and structure society”(R. J. Feagin, 2010, p. 31). From this definition, we can deduce that to exercise and maintain power in society, Whites

simply set up social rules that can help reinforce their supremacy in multiracial societies.

In addition to the norm of superiority, another social rule rewards all the people who have a white skin color by giving them all social privileges while depriving colored people of any advantages. This norm that grants privileges on the basis of the color of skin enables Whites to benefit from social advantages not only as individuals, but as a group. It therefore promotes “white privilege” to the detriment of colored people. In such a context, Blacks face many obstacles to integrate themselves in society. On political, social and economic levels, they have very limited opportunities because of this racist norm set up by Whites to disadvantage them. They do not have access to social privileges and it is very difficult for them to get jobs that can enable them to be independent. As victim of this social norm, Grant Wiggins declares to Vivian :

I need to go to someplace where I can feel I'm living” I said. “I don't want to spend the rest of my life teaching in a plantation church. I want to be with you, someplace where we could have a choice of things to do. I don't feel alive here. I'm not living here. I know we can do better someplace else. (p. 29)

This norm that confers all privileges to Whites is the most straightforward means of marginalizing and disadvantaging black people as a group. It leads to their subordination and they cannot escape their fate because Whites endeavor to maintain their social power by applying the norm of “white privilege” in their social interaction with Blacks. The logic of this rule that discriminates against Blacks is to lay the foundations of systemic racism. Maurianne Adams et.al simply consider this norm as discriminatory and unveil its logic when they define discrimination as follows: “discrimination is the differential allocation of goods, resources, services and the limitation of access to full participation in society, based on an individual's membership in a particular social group.(M. Adams et. al., 2007, p. 22)

Another striking social norm in *A Lesson Before Dying* is the norm of humanity. In the fictional society that Gaines introduces to the reader, only people who have a white skin color are considered as human beings. Blacks are perceived like animals because they lack the racial criterion to be called human beings. This norm is perceptible through Jefferson's dehumanization by the white lawyer, who has to

defend him. Instead of defending Jefferson, The white lawyer denies not only Jefferson's human attributes, but also that of the other colored people. For the lawyer, Blacks are not intelligent and they always act in command like animals. He states :

Gentlemen of the jury, look at him – look at this. Do you see a man sitting here? I ask you, I implore, look at the shape of his skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand – look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan – can plan – can plan anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa – yes, yes, that he can do - to plan? [...] 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. That is what you see here [...] What justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this. (pp.7-8)

From the analysis of the words used by the white lawyer in his plea, we discover that he does not intend to plead Jefferson's case. He rather takes advantage of the situation to humiliate and devalue Jefferson. If the white lawyer is capable of denying the humanity of a black person at the court, it means that the norm of humanity, though unwritten, is known by everyone in society under the criterion of skin color. If a person has a skin color different from the white skin color, his or her human attributes are automatically denied by the white racial group. This arbitrary norm dehumanizes the black racial group. The logic of the idea of the superiority of the white skin color over the black skin color is to consider Whites superior to Blacks. Therefore, we perceive the ideology of whiteness in the text. Terry Eagleton sums up the relation between the literary text and ideology as follows :

The literary text, that is to say, produces ideology (itself a production) in a way analogous to the operations of dramatic production on dramatic text. And just as the dramatic production's relation to its text reveals the text's internal relations to its 'world' under the form of its own constitution of them, so the literary text's relation to ideology so constitutes that ideology as to reveal something of its relations to history. (T. Eagleton, 1976, pp. 68-69)

Finally, the other social norm that can be considered arbitrary is the norm of justice. In Gaines's novel, justice belongs to Whites. They are the ones who decide who is right or wrong. From how justice operates in Jefferson's case, we can state that in *A Lesson Before Dying* if you



are White, you are right. In fact, Jefferson has to die for a murder he did not commit. He is victim of an unjust decision from white justice and has to be electrocuted simply because he is black. Like the other Blacks who are victims of unfair norms, he is a scapegoat that whites blame and punish for racial murder even if there are victims in both racial groups. It is in this context that René Girard writes: “the victims of unjust violence or unfair rules or norms become the “scapegoats” who are blamed or punished by their persecutors for all wrong deeds (R. Girard, 1986, p. 74). Consequently, the role of justice is to promote injustice against Blacks. The malfunctioning of white justice is brought to life in the following passage :

A white man had been killed during a robbery, and though two of the robbers had been killed on the spot one had been captured, and he, too would have to die. Though he told them no, he had nothing to do with it, that he was on his way to the White Rabbit Bar and Lounge when Brother and Bear drove up beside him and offered him a ride. (p. 4).

What is more unfair in Jefferson's trial is that the jurors that make up the jury are all Whites. They are the ones who have to decide if Jefferson should live or die. They have the right to take Jefferson's life because justice does not exist for Blacks. In this context, Jefferson's trial becomes a racial trial. Therefore, the white jurors do not rely on any piece of evidence to deliver a fair verdict. Given that they have antagonistic relations with Blacks, they sentenced Jefferson to death in order to punish not only Jefferson, but also all the people who belong to the black race. The following verdict of the trial testifies the arbitrariness of the norm of justice :

The jury retired, and it returned a verdict after lunch: guilty of robbery and murder in the first degree. The judge commended the twelve white men for reaching a quick and just verdict. This was Friday. He would pass sentence on Monday [...] Death by electrocution. The governor would set the date. (pp. 8-9)

The lack of justice for Blacks explains why Grant Wiggins decided not to go to the court to attend the trial. He has no trust in “white justice” since it operates against Blacks and serves Whites' expectations. He is right when he distrusts white justice because his prediction of the verdict was right. He said: “I WAS NOT THERE, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be” (p. 3). Through Grant Wiggins's right prediction

of the verdict, it is clear that Whites are always right and Blacks have to expect to be blamed or punished for racial tensions. Thus, for the black teacher, there is no justice in society. This is the reason why the travesty of justice in Jefferson's case leads him to be pessimistic about the judicial system when he asks: "Twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. Justice?" (p. 157)

The analysis of regulation in *A Lesson before Dying* shows that all social norms in the novel are created or set up against Blacks. They are not only victims of customary standards for behavior, attitudes and beliefs which are unjust, but they are also blamed for racial problems in society. These arbitrary social rules prevent Blacks from being integrated in society and make them dependent on Whites. The superstructure in the fictional society consists of arbitrary laws and discriminatory politics. This superstructure, which operates against colored people, results in power imbalances and facilitates the hegemony of Whites in society. Therefore, social norms in Gaines's novel cause Blacks' oppression. How do Jefferson and Grant Wiggins react to these norms that devalue and inferiorize the black race?

## **2. Grant Wiggins and Jefferson's Reaction to Arbitrary Social Norms : from Conformity to Rebellion**

Grant Wiggins and Jefferson have two kinds of reaction to oppressive social norms. Although they are fully conscious of the breakdown in accepted social norms, they firstly decided to adapt to the arbitrary social norms by conforming themselves with established social rules. As far as Grant Wiggins is concerned, he is dissatisfied with his social condition. But social norms make him incapable of claiming a better one. He reluctantly accepts his condition because there is no way out. For example, in a conversation with Jefferson, he reveals: "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." (p. 191). As we can perceive, the black teacher is compelled to adapt to his social condition because he cannot do anything to change his status. So, he just adjusts his behavior to suit social prescribed rules. In society, it is only Whites who have right to employment. Consequently, he has to contend himself with being a teacher in the black community.

As for Jefferson, his conformity with arbitrary social norms is obvious through his refusal to behave like a human being. Indeed, since he has been identified as a “hog” by the white lawyer, he decides to act like an animal to adapt to the social norm of humanity set up by Whites. Therefore, he refuses to eat food brought to him by Grant Wiggins. He thinks that as a “hog”, he should not eat food eaten by human beings. He acts in accordance with what Whites want him to be by “animalizing” himself. He denies or rejects his human attributes by refusing to behave like a human being. From the day he was considered as an animal by the white lawyer, he decided to do what animals do. Such a reality is obvious in the passage below :

“I’m a old hog,” he said, more to himself than to me. “Just a old hog they fattening up to kill for Christmas.” “You’re a human being, Jefferson. You’re a man.” He kept his eyes on me as he got up from the bunk. “I’m go’n show you how a old hog eat,” he said. He knelt down on the floor and put his head inside the bag and started eating, without using his hands. He even sounded like a hog [...] “That’s how a old hog eat,” he said, raising his head and grinning at me. He got up from his knees and went back to his bunk. “That’s how a old hog eat.” (p. 83)

Jefferson’s attitude shows that he has internalized his dehumanization by the white lawyer. From the impact of the white lawyer’s words on Jefferson, it is clear that social norms set up by Whites are not only intended to control Blacks’ behavior, but they also make them feel worthless of human values. As victim of this unfair norm of humanity, Jefferson isolates himself from people by complying with racist social standards. He is reluctant about accepting people’s visits because his human attributes have been denied by Whites. He wants to be away from the human world in order not to be reminded that his physical traits make him unsuitable to belong to the human race.

From Grant Wiggins and Jefferson’s conformity with discriminatory norms, we can conclude that they live in a society that restricts all their actions. They cannot take an action without making reference to social norms. They are dependent on Whites since the latter ones are the people who decide how they should behave. In such a context, we perceive a paternalistic relationship between Whites and colored people in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Blacks adapt to Whites’ will by respecting social norms in favor of the white racial group. This explains why Grant Wiggins and Jefferson just accept their condition and let Whites express their racial supremacy by remaining silent and subservient. Grant

Wiggins alludes to this supremacy when he tells Jefferson about the unfairness of the jury's decision. He declares :

They 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. (p. 159)

Given that Grant Wiggins and Jefferson conform themselves with the social standards set up against Blacks despite their arbitrariness, it is possible to state that norms in Gaines's novel are ideas or beliefs that enable Whites to make Blacks submissive so that they do not challenge their supremacy. Therefore, in the novel under study, norms serve a regulation function to the detriment of Blacks. In other words, social norms favor Whites over Blacks. However, these norms because of their arbitrariness cannot keep Blacks subservient forever. The racist features of social norms lead Grant Wiggins and Jefferson to have another reaction to norms.

Having noticed that social norms only deny or restrict Blacks' rights, Grant Wiggins and Jefferson develop another attitude. They challenge social norms set up against them by adopting a deviant behavior that amounts to rebellion. Grant Wiggins is the initiator of this rebellion. He develops feeling of resentment and this feeling leads him to decide to challenge arbitrary social norms that Blacks are victims of. He starts his rebellion by deconstructing social norms when he pays visit to Jefferson in prison. He makes Jefferson discover the arbitrariness of all social norms when he tells him :

“Do you know what a myth is, Jefferson?” [...] “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 is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. 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. (p. 192)

Grant Wiggins is able to deconstruct the politics of social norms because he notices that Whites consider all black people as rivals. For him, arbitrary social norms are established by Whites to shape their relationship with Blacks in terms of difference. As a result, in the process of norming, Whites do their best to differ from Blacks by

setting up racial boundaries. In such a perspective, the black teacher thinks that social privileges and power structures are tools used by Whites to cause power imbalances in order to marginalize, dehumanize and devalue Blacks. In doing so, he challenges the idea of Whites' superiority over Blacks and tries to convince Jefferson to reject all the negative ideas associated with Blacks' identity. His deconstruction of social norms is perceptible through what he tells Jefferson in the following passage :

Those out there are not better than we are, Jefferson. They are worse. That's why they are always looking for a scapegoat, someone else to blame. I want you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To them, you're nothing but another nigger – no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong. (p. 191)

These ideas enable Grant Wiggins to instill in Jefferson the desire to avoid feeling inferior to Whites. Since Jefferson is the official scapegoat that Whites use to punish and blame the whole black community, the black teacher psychologically prepares him to challenge Whites' norms by encouraging him to refuse to die like an animal. He encourages Jefferson to rebel against all racial prejudices and stereotypes that Whites have towards Blacks. Through Jefferson, the black teacher is involved in a quest for Blacks' dignity. Therefore, he entrusts Jefferson with the mission of dying with dignity so that Whites have respect towards Blacks. He tells him :

I want you to chip away at that myth by standing. I want you – yes, you – to call them liars. I want you to show them that you are as much a man – more a man that they can ever be. That jury? You call them men? That judge? Is he a man? The governor is no better. They play by the rules their forefathers created hundreds of years ago. Their forefathers said that we're only three-fifths human – and they believe it to this day (p. 192)

Through the mission that Grant Wiggins entrusts Jefferson with, it is obvious that the black teacher is fed up with the tricks Whites use to claim superiority over Blacks. He wants to put an end to the cycle of Blacks' subordination to Whites by encouraging Jefferson to refuse to comply with the social norm that denies the humanity of colored people. Since Jefferson has overtly been identified as a hog by the white juror, Grant Wiggins endeavors to give Jefferson moral strength so that he can get rid of the unfounded ideas he has internalized. For the black teacher, it is thanks to arbitrary norms that Whites succeed in devaluing the black race. Whenever he meets Jefferson, he deconstructs Whites'

racial superiority in order to make him realize that he is as important as a white person in terms of value. This mission aims at turning Jefferson into a hero whose death will have a significant impact on the lives of all Blacks. Consequently, he uses words to motivate the black scapegoat to rebel against Whites and assert Blacks' dignity and value. As a matter of fact, he declares :

A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don't and can't do. He is above other men. No matter who he is, is above them [...] I am not that kind of person, but I want you to be. You could give something to her, to me, to those children in the quarter. You could give them something that I never could. They expect it from me, but not from you. The white people out there are saying that you don't have it – That you're a hog, not a man. But I know they are wrong. You have the potentials. We all have, no matter who we are. (p. 191)

Like Grant Wiggins, Miss Emma's desire is to see Jefferson keep his dignity of human being even if he has to die. For Jefferson's godmother, accepting to die powerlessly by behaving like a hog is the worst affront to the black race. Although Jefferson is under sentence of death, she wants the black scapegoat to challenge Whites' criterion of humanity by asserting his racial pride. She does not want him to have a cowardly attitude in front of his "unfair" death. Thus, she asks Grant Wiggins to encourage Jefferson to use death as an opportunity to teach a lesson to Whites and show them that all the beliefs they have towards the black race are mistaken beliefs. She expresses this desire as follows:

"They called my boy a hog, Mr. Henri," Miss Emma said. I didn't raise no hog, and I don't want no hog to go set in that chair. I want a man to go set in that chair [...] I want the teacher visit my boy. I want the teacher make him know that 'fore he go that chair. (pp. 20-21)

It is worth noting that Grant Wiggins's efforts to make Jefferson rebel against the norm of humanity proved to be fruitful. Indeed, Jefferson walked to the electrocution chair with pride. Behaving this way, he teaches a lesson to Whites by showing them that despite their arbitrary norms set up to inferiorize, dehumanize and devalue the black race, Blacks can never jeopardize their pride and dignity for social privileges. The scapegoat has therefore used his death not only as an occasion to pay tribute to his race, but also to make Whites realize that the social norms they use to deny Blacks of values and privileges are absurd. Consequently, he is considered as a hero by the black

community, particularly by Paul, who gives an account of the electrocution to Grant Wiggins as follows :

He was the strongest man in that crowded room [...] He was, he was. I'm not saying this to make you feel good. I'm not saying this to ease your pain. Ask that preacher, ask Harry Williams. He was the strongest man there. We all stood jammed together, no more than six, eight feet away from that chair. We all had each other to lean on. When Vincent asked him if he had any last words, he looked at the preacher and said, "Tell Nannan I walked." And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked. I'm a witness. Straight he walked." (pp. 253-254)

Grant Wiggins and Jefferson's rebellion against social norms show that people cannot respect arbitrary norms forever. They may keep on complying with rules that deprive them of privileges and rights without having a hostile attitude towards their oppressors. However, when a norm devalues social groups by putting their self-esteem, value and dignity in jeopardy, it always causes rebellion. The social group, which is victim of dehumanization and inferiorization is going to challenge the norms that alienate them arbitrarily. This explains why rebellion against social norms in *A Lesson Before Dying* starts when Jefferson's human attributes are denied by Whites.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, we can say that *A Lesson Before Dying* unveils the arbitrariness of social norms. In this novel, norms are established to favor Whites over Blacks. Since they are numerically superior to Blacks, Whites set up rules that enable them to exercise their hegemony in society. The logic behind social regulation is the promotion of white supremacy. Consequently, in the novel, norms are set up to the detriment of Blacks. They just enable Whites to monopolize social privileges, to control Blacks' lives and to deny their humanity. This unfair politics of social norms causes Blacks' marginalization and devaluation. Thus, the set of rules established by Whites to regulate society does not take into account Blacks' aspirations. Social norms in Ernest Gaines's novel instead of serving a fair regulation function not only dispossess Blacks of social advantages, but they also promote Whites' superiority over colored people. These oppressive social norms can also be perceived as tricks or strategies used by Whites to blame and punish Blacks for preventing them from entering into competition with them in order not to challenge their racial supremacy. However, Whites cannot use arbitrary social norms to control Blacks forever

because these unfair rules lead to rebellion that can cause social conflicts. Consequently, to promote a peaceful social environment, norms should not be set up to favor a social group over another one.

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