

A look at the  
ineffectiveness of  
high education as  
portrayed by Ernest J.  
Gaines ...



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Why does education exist? Education is a tool, essential to bettering mankind. It can be applicable in endless ways. However education alone does not guarantee yield. Grant, the protagonist from the novel *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J Gaines is displeased with his life because his high education is going to waste. When Jefferson is given the death penalty, Grant finds it preposterous that the black community wants him to not only make Jefferson a man. As the story unfolds, their meetings prove to teach lessons to not only Jefferson, but Grant as well. In comparison, the arrogant Victor Frankenstein of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* has a prestigious education, yet is not able to understand the importance of collaboration more than his Creation. Rather, Robert Walton serves as a balanced medium between education and being able to interact with others to make it useful. As any amount of education is a stepping-stone to intellect, the inclusion of emotional interaction heightens intellect, making it useful to the individual and humanity.

To begin with, Grant was not able to utilize his education to truly help others until he himself understood the necessity of compassion. For example, Grant hates teaching to the point where he even brutally explains in front of his students including Jefferson's cousin how Jefferson is labeled as a hog and sentenced to death without "[apologizing] for what [he] said, [or showing] any sympathy for her crying" (Gaines 40). This clearly characterizes Grant as a harsh teacher who has no compassion. Due to both his lack of passion in teaching and self-adulation of high education, Grant cannot effectively teach the children anything because he feels the children cannot comprehend him and the teaching is useless to them anyway. Therefore his intellect is

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useless. However after several interactions with Jefferson, Grant becomes emotionally attached. Grant even speaks up against Reverend Ambrose to emphasize that “[Jefferson] needs that radio, and he wants it. He wants something of his own before he dies” (Gaines 182). The radio is a symbol for a beacon that mentally motivates Jefferson to live his life out to the death. This and the interactions with Jefferson show that Grant finally sees the necessity of compassion. Only after learning this does he succeed in making Jefferson “ the strongest man in that crowded room” ( Gaines 253). This hyperbole grabs the essence of how striking Jefferson’s courage was viewed by the others. Hence, one can only use education to help others when motivated by a passion.

Additionally, Jefferson uses the lessons he gains from the interactions with Grant to rise well above his meager education to prove himself a man, brave in the face of death. For example, when Grant explains to Jefferson how to chip away at the myth, “ he may have not understood, but something was touched, something deep down in him – because he was still crying” (Gaines 193). This paradox characterizes Jefferson as a person who although is uneducated, can feel the emotions and meanings behind Grant’s lesson. Grant’s lesson of breaking the myth showed Jefferson the magnanimity of what he could accomplish by being a man and standing at his death. The imagery of Jefferson continuously crying shows how affected Jefferson was, emphasizing the interaction between the two characters. Jefferson is able to use this wisdom to believe give himself pride and bravery. Furthermore, after Jefferson’s death, Grant “ went up to the desk and turned to face them. [He] was crying” (Gaines 256). In comparison of Grant’s behavior in school from <https://assignbuster.com/a-look-at-the-ineffectiveness-of-high-education-as-portrayed-by-ernest-j-gaines-in-a-lesson-before-dying-and-mary-shelleys-frankenstein/>

the beginning of the novel where he was strict to the end where he shows emotion, sympathy, and compassion in front of the student, it is evident that Jefferson was able to spread the intellect he had and positively influence others even without a fancy education.

In contrast, despite Frankenstein's prestigious education, his overwhelming hubris blinds him from seeing the benefits of collaboration, something even his Creation could see. To begin with, reaching a higher education than any other scholar, it is not surprising that Victor's imagination was too exalted to " permit [him from doubting his] ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man (Shelly 48). Victor's arrogance leads him to choose isolation because he does not deem any others worthy. This backfired when his Creation was a hideous creature that could be loved by no one. This shows how if he collaborated with other great minds, Victor could have achieved greatness and greatly aided humanity. On the other hand, the Creation " found that people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds... and [he] ardently desired to become acquainted with it" (Shelly 100). The Creation's desire to communicate with others to escape isolation clearly illustrates how even the Creation recognized the importance of companionship. It is ironic how Frankenstein, even with his education, cannot grasp the importance of collaboration through his death, showing education is nothing if one cannot use it to help oneself or humanity.

Lastly, by cooperating with his own crew, Robert Walton realizes that sacrifice of scientific knowledge is trivial to the amount of wisdom that

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comes with acquiring common sense. Consider how he obliged to his crew's request that "if the vessel should be freed [he] would instantly direct [his] course southwards" (Shelly 189). This shows Robert collaborating and interacting with his crew to come to a consensus to abandon the journey. Unlike Victor, Robert actually listens to others and considers their opinions. This allows him to re-evaluate his plans to weigh which options are more beneficial to himself, and the others. Robert considers the whole team and "[consents] to return if [they] are not destroyed" (Shelly 189). This shows that Robert values life more than new discoveries. Collaboration was a vital role for in showing Robert common sense. Common sense can also be viewed as education that proved beneficial to both Robert and his crew, showing that listening to others can guide one to make a smart decision.

Intellect is not just a reflection of one's education; it is a depiction of what one can do with the education one has. Jefferson and the Creature clearly show how even small amounts of education can make a wave. On the contrary Grant and Frankenstein exemplify how complex education will not render beneficial outcome without deep, emotional understandings and collaborations with others. Therefore it is important to understand that education may allow one to become larger than life, but only when used synergistically with other factors such as collaboration and companionship that make it useful in aiding individuals and humanity.