

# Example of essay on character and symbol in a lesson before dying

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



The period of history that spans between the arrivals of Patrick Henry and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., contains some of the most significant instances of paradox within a political system. The United States was formed, in large part, because of the rallying cry “ Give me liberty, or give me death!” When the American Revolution ended, of course, a portion of the founding Constitution of the nation declared that blacks who were slaves counted as three-fifths of a person, in terms of taxation and representation. In some of the states, blacks were free; in others, they could be bought and sold as slaves. Even after one of the bloodiest conflicts in the nation's history - the one it fought within itself - and blacks were given their freedom, after a few years, the whites managed to set up a political system in which blacks were intimidated out of voting and relegated to a “ separate but equal” set of institutions, including schools as well as sections of buses, and even restrooms and water fountains. It is this society that Ernest Gaines examines in *A Lesson Before Dying*, and one of the themes in the interaction between Grant and Jefferson is that it is not enough to recognize injustice; once one has recognized it, it is then necessary to face responsibility for fighting that injustice. Through the use of symbol and characterization, Gaines brings that theme to the attention of the reader.

One of the most important symbols in the story is the journal that Grant gives to Jefferson. When they first meet, Grant wants Jefferson to consider the significance of his passing for the community at large, but Jefferson is resistant, arguing that reflection is the province of people like Grant, not hogs - to which Jefferson's attorney had compared him during his trial, as part of his argument that Jefferson should not be put to death. While this

might well have been an effective strategy, given the fact that trials in those days consisted only of white men, it does not work for Jefferson, and it ends up wounding his own self-concept. However, when Grant brings Jefferson the radio and the notebook, it opens up Jefferson's personal realm to the world outside; as a result, Jefferson begins to consider his place in an unfair world, and starts to think seriously about his own place in the world. The journal is the symbol of the friendship between Jefferson and Grant; Grant shows that he wants to help Jefferson teach himself; Jefferson uses the journal to address Grant, which shows that Grant's ideas are inspiring Jefferson even when is not in the cell with him. When the white deputy (Paul) hands Grant the book and asks permission to shake his hand, the journal takes on the significance of showing the possibility of harmony between whites and blacks in the future. Without the active involvement that writing in the journal requires, though, none of this would happen, which contributes to the theme that acknowledging the existence of a problem is not enough; one must work toward eliminating that problem.

The electric chair is a powerful symbol after it arrives in the town. Even the large black truck in which the chair arrives has associations of its own, with trappings of power and death. When people look at the chair, some of them find it nauseating, while others view it as a grim object. Some of the less mature people in town (in particular, some of the unrefined white men in the town) use it as a comic prop to warn black men in the town about staying out of trouble. The electric chair serves as a symbol of the finality of the death sentence - and, by extension, the absurdity of Jefferson's death sentence.

The death sentences that were handed down by white juries to black men during the time of segregation made a mockery of the principles of liberty and freedom that led the first colonists to find a new life in the British colonies in North America, and then led the colonists to rise up against what they considered unjust levels of taxation and control coming across the Atlantic Ocean. This sort of protest is found in several novels written during this time period about the race struggle; consider the death of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After having been wrongly convicted for his contact with a white woman in his town, Tom is shot in prison for allegedly having tried to escape. The implication, though, is that the prison guards simply finished off what the jury itself could not do - end this black man's life. As a result, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, the electric chair is a symbol of the injustice that can result when an allegedly free society allows some of its members to contradict its ideals in creating an oppressive system. The chair is a cry for protest; however, the fear that it instills keeps that cry from taking shape.

The church is a symbol for the hope that, eventually, society will change and become more equal. Grant is an atheist, in part because of his disgust at the injustice that is the lot of blacks during the time period in which the story is set. However, many other characters in the story (Tante Lou, Rev. Ambrose and Miss Emma among them) do believe in God - and believe that God helps them in their fight against injustice. When Rev. Ambrose upbraids Grant, indicating that any man has the power to choose between kneeling and standing, he implies that the act of kneeling can confer dignity rather than submission - particularly when that kneeling takes place before God.

Kneeling before one's fellow man is a completely different sort of action – one that it is doubtful Rev. Ambrose would suggest. While that sort of submission is what the white establishment would have wanted to see from Grant, Jefferson, and the rest of the black community, it is not the way that people should interact with one another. Rather, that sort of reverence is only due to God. Once Grant realizes that his atheism is less a matter of theology than one of disdain for one's society, he has an easier time finding his faith – and his dignity. Reengaging with his community by taking on injustice helps Grant find more solace within the church.

The use of indirect characterization is also important in the communication of the theme of the importance of action. When Jefferson is sentenced to death, he takes his lawyer's likening of himself to a simple hog to heart. During his first days in his jail cell, he acts like a hog, going into fits in his cell and either making the sounds of a hog when family and friends come to visit, or simply ignoring them. By having the character show his rage indirectly, rather than simply telling the reader that Jefferson was unhinged by his comparison to a hog, Gaines gives the reader a much more vivid view at the effects of condescension on the personality – and on the self. This is the power that indirect characterization brings to prose. Instead of simply telling the reader that something is (or is not) the case, the author uses prose to show the reader a characteristic or a trait of a person or situation. Stories are always more memorable than statements, and so it is with Jefferson's early incarceration.

It was, of course, Dr. King's insistence on action that, in large part, brought the era of institutionalized racism in the United States to an end. While racism does persist, the noxious laws that allowed it to be part and parcel of the American experience were shown to be the work of a hateful few, instead of a proper method of governance. Without Dr. King's bravery, it is difficult to say what the status of civil rights would be in the United States today. It might have been that other leaders would have risen up, as Malcolm X and others did, to take up the fight for civil rights. However, many of the other dissidents who decided to take up the fight of civil rights ended up supporting more violent solutions than Dr. King did, and so the struggle might well have taken on a much less peaceful form, particularly given the fact that there was the simultaneous social upheaval regarding Vietnam. In Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*, the author uses symbol and characterization to show the importance of action in the face of injustice - the lesson that both Grant and Jefferson learn is that when injustice causes fear, the only thing that giving into that fear guarantees is that the injustice will never end.

## **Works Cited**

Gaines, Ernest J. *A Lesson Before Dying*. New York: Serpents Tail, c1998. Print.