A migrant writer returns home: Ernest Gaines in *Catherine Carmier* and *A Lesson Before Dying*

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Introduction

It is common among many emigrant writers, especially from the former colonized countries of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean to revisit their homeland through fiction centering on a protagonist who returns home. Examples include Caryl Phillips's *A State of Independence* (the Caribbean), Bharati Mukherjee's *A Tiger's Daughter* (India), Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road* (India), and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (Zanzibar).

These writers have made new homes in places like Britain, Canada, or the United States. When they had originally left their native lands, many had not planned to settle abroad but had left to attend college. They ended up staying. The 'return home' stories by such writers appear to reflect the ambivalence towards 'home' felt by the writers themselves. Many different situations and themes are explored, including old and new love affairs, family drama, and political or social alienation. Writers reveal their troubled feelings about the tensions of modernity and tradition and their ambivalence about political developments. We often see disillusionment over the descent of post-colonial regimes into corruption, brutality, and cynicism. In a few cases, the novels almost read as after-the-fact justifications for the authors' decision to settle in the North.

The American South has also been the locus of massive out-migration by black people during the last century. One would expect black American writers who have moved out of the South to also explore this fictional territory. But while it is more common to find representations of the arrival in new home places – in cities like Harlem or Chicago – it is rare to find many examples of the 'return home' story. Alice Walker has treated the subject in at least one of her short stories, "Everyday use." However, it is Ernest Gaines who has most often centered novels on characters who return to the South they left behind. He did this in his first novel *Catherine Carmier*, in *In My Father's House*, and in his last novel *A Lesson Before Dying.* It is interesting

that in his fiction, Gaines never dwells on the California where he migrated to in his teens, preferring to focus instead on the place and people he left behind in rural Louisiana.

Ernest Gaines's life has some similarities with emigrant Third World writers. In late adolescence, in his case at fifteen, he left his home in Louisiana to join his family in the San Francisco Bay Area. He left because there were no high schools at home where he could study. It appears he was reluctant to leave his aunt and when he began to write he wanted to write of the people he left behind. In a conversation with Bill Ferris, he said:

> I left the South when I was quite young because I could not get the kind of education my people wanted me to get. But I can still write about it because I left something there, you see. I left a place I could love. I left people there that I loved.
>
> When a lot of black writers and white writers leave the South, they want to totally wipe it out of their minds. They don't want to remember it. Or if they remember it, they remember it as a place that was not a happy place in their lives. … I can write about it still because I left something there. Living in San Francisco is not like living behind an iron curtain. I go back all the time. And there are many Louisianas here in San Francisco. (Ferris 1)

This essay explores how Gaines deals with a returned-home character in two of his novels, *Catherine Carmier* and *A Lesson Before Dying*. I compare how in the two books Gaines handles the emotional tugs of love, obligation, alienation and hostility that are the most common themes in 'returned home' stories. My analysis devotes specific attention to the use of structural elements such as plot lines, mirror and helper characters, and repetition. While Gaines uses a similar pattern of characters and relationships in both books, the dominant sensibility in the novels shifts from one of alienation to love and commitment. Structurally, he seems to mature from using non-intersecting plot lines to a braiding technique, where he displays much greater skill in interweaving plot lines, more connected relationships, and a more developed use of helper characters.

The Two Novels

In *Catherine Carmier* first published in 1964, Gaines focuses on a character named Jackson Bradley who comes home at the beginning of the novel to the 'quarters' near Bayonne, Gaines's typical fictional landscape. He had left home to go to college and now he has come home to his aunt Charlotte. She thinks he has come home to stay, but Jackson plans to leave. He knew he would no longer fit in within the social codes existing in Louisiana. He has to tell Charlotte this and bear the consequences. At the same time, he resumes a romantic involvement with Catherine Carmier. She is however torn between Jackson and her father Raoul. At the end of the book, Jackson fights Raoul to take Catherine away. Though she had agreed to leave with him, she changes her mind after he bests Raoul. Jackson will leave, we assume, but Catherine says she will eventually come to him, and Della, her mother adds, "You wait for her, you hear? If it takes twenty years, you wait."

Nearly twenty years after that novel, Gaines published *A Lesson Before Dying.* At least one admirer of Gaines considers this book to be a sequel to his first one (Lepschy). It is not quite a sequel, but with much the same pattern of characters, Gaines mines the same territory. Now we have the protagonist Grant Wiggins, a local schoolteacher, who had left the plantation but returned. For ten years he has been living with his aunt Tante Lou, but he hates the place and the small life he has been reduced to, and he desperately wants to leave. Only his sense of duty to his aunt and his love for Vivian, a Creole schoolteacher, keep him here. But it is not enough. The major plot line in this novel involves a situation, which answers the question why he should stay. His aunt pushes him to teach Jefferson, a condemned black man, how to die in dignity. Despite great reluctance, he agrees and persists, and it is this struggle to teach Jefferson that also answers Grant's major existential question, to stay or leave.

The Emotional Pull and Push: Love and Obligation, Alienation and Hostility

A migrant returned home is pulled there by love or its close cousin, obligation. S/he is pushed away by feelings of alienation and hostility. This is territory familiar to most emigrant writers writing of home. These feelings are not like the corner points of a square or rectangle, instead they are a continuum running into each other.

While love of home is sometimes treated with relation to land and place, it is most often personified. Often there is a revived love affair from the past or a new romantic interest. In other situations, love involves family ties. In these situations, love is sometimes masked as obligation. In fact, obligation is frequently a messy mix of love and alienation. The claims of home can also come from the community the protagonist has been historically part of – whether this be racial or tribal, an extended family or 'village,' a circle of old friends, or a political community of comrades.

Rare is the migrant returned home who does not feel a sense of dislocation. The 'outsider' feeling can involve both alienation and hostility. Time, physical distance, and cultural shifts as a result of the migration naturally create a gulf between 'home' and the returnee. We see alienation from the values one once used to believe in, such as religion or moral codes. There is a loss of common language with the community one was once part of, sometimes even literally.

In many of these stories, the emigrant once left as an exile or near-exile. Social or political oppression, or intense family conflicts, often drives people away. When the returnee confronts the same forces once again, the old feelings of hostility and hatred are reawakened.

The range of emotions felt by a returnee is of course not confined to these four. There can also be such feelings as nostalgia, guilt or self-hatred. I have focused on the four because they are predominant and well represented in the Gaines novels.

Love

In *Catherine Carmier*, Jackson revives a love affair with Catherine who seems to have been a childhood sweetheart. The relationship between Jackson and Catherine is the central plot line of the novel, and it is foreshadowed right at the beginning when Jackson runs into Catherine at the bus stop. Their encounter is accidental – Catherine was there to pick up her sister Lillian. We see the spark right when they exchange greetings, though it is only hinted at:

> Neither one of them said anything else, but they continued looking at each other as though there was much more to talk about between them. Then suddenly Jackson seemed to catch himself; he smiled embarrassedly and looked away. (18)

And the exchange between Jackson and his friend Brother tells us the core of the story to come:

> "Left to her, she 'ud do lotta things. But it's Raoul."
> "He's still the same?"
> "He go'n die the same."
> "Nobody has taken her from him yet?"
> "And nobody go'n do it."
> Jackson did not say any more. He looked out of the window, but seemed only half interested in the things they were passing. (19-20)

We know this is going to be a forbidden love. Catherine is bound to her father in a near-incestuous relationship. Raoul will not let Catherine go both because she is his crutch, and because of his hatred for the dark-skinned people his daughter is attracted to. Despite this obstacle, Catherine responds to Jackson and their love is rekindled. But she knows that loving him means negating her love for her father and leaving this place. Midway through the novel, she changes her mind and turns her back on Jackson.

Gaines uses Lillian, Catherine's sister, as both a helper character to move the plot along and as a mirror character. I see a helper character as a secondary character who is not part of a sub-plot but whose role is only to help along another plot line. A mirror character is one who

embodies some of the same characteristics as another character, but possibly in a more exaggerated form.

Lillian is Jackson's mirror in the sense that she too has returned home. She was sent away to live in the city among Raoul's relatives. Her feelings towards home are not simply alienated, they are downright hostile. She comes home only because she loves Catherine but she refuses to be considerate towards her parents. She announces that this is her last trip home and she will move out of the state. She has come to rescue Catherine. When she sees Jackson has also returned, she tries to set them up. Her motive appears to be love for her sister but we get the feeling that more likely it is revenge against her parents and relatives. As her final helping act in the plot, she sends an invitation to Jackson to attend the dance. Jackson comes and is able to convince Catherine to leave with him. But there are other 'helper characters' in this dialectic. The Cajuns who want to see Raoul defeated – he is the last surviving black farmer in the area – have paid some black people to inform Raoul about the secret reunion. The stage is set for the final confrontation.

Family and friends would also appear to be Jackson's objects of love, or at least affection. These are personified by Charlotte, Brother, and Mary Louise. The love for Charlotte is more manifested as obligation, while both Brother as a character and the relationship between him and Jackson get thin treatment from Gaines. He is not even a helper character but almost part of the landscape. He brings out a few things, such as some information about what has been taking place in the region, with the Cajuns taking over more and more of the land. He is also there as someone Jackson spends time with. But the relationship is in the main ignored.

Mary Louise is a special case. She has remained in love with Jackson – he was her boyfriend before he left – but now Jackson simply treats her as a sister. She had been hoping for

Jackson's love all these years, but when he tells her that he is leaving, she simply accepts. When it becomes clear that he is in love with Catherine, she also quietly accepts that. Like the relationship with Brother, this too is given a weak treatment. Her major encounter with Jackson – where he tells her he's leaving – becomes mainly a time of silence. She is tearful and appears intimidated. He feels he has no common language with her to explain what he really feels. There is a long interior monologue where he revisits his experiences in the north (the length of this monologue accentuates the uncomfortable silence between the two in this scene).

Love for the place is not much brought out in this novel, at least from Jackson's perspective. It is expressed by Gaines in the voice of Catherine right after she has decided to leave the plantation with Jackson:

> I will not see Bayonne again, I will not see the trees again, I will not see the river again, I will not see him, my father again, I will not see Lillian again, I will see none of what I'm seeing now again…. the trees go by, the cars, the fences, the river, Louisiana – my life. (231-2)

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, there is also a romantic relationship between our protagonist Grant and a Creole woman, Vivian Baptiste. This love affair has been going on for a while when we enter the story. When we first see this romance, depicted in a meeting between Grant and Vivian in the Rainbow Club, Grant concedes only this as the love that keeps him here. Grant has been pushed by his aunt and Miss Emma to take on the task of visiting Jefferson in prison, and he is not feeling up to the responsibility. He asks Vivian to leave with him, saying he is tired of living there and needs to go someplace where he can feel he's living.

> "Then why haven't you gone?"
> "Because of you." (29)

While this romance is not the central plot line like it was in the first novel, it is closely intertwined with the progress of the main plot. Vivian is a helper character, but one with a larger

role than any in the earlier novel. Her support and encouragement are crucial in Grant's decision to go forward with Jefferson. And she also forces him to confront himself. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, a key question facing Grant is "will he stay or leave?" Gaines uses repetition – there are four scenes involving the two – and in each the conversation on the subject advances.

During their first meeting, when he asks her to leave with him, she says no. He presses her.

> "People do it all the time. Just pack up and leave."
> "Some people can, but we can't," she said. "We're teachers, and we have a commitment."
> "You hit the nail on the head there, lady—commitment. Commitment to what—to live and die in this hellhole, when we can leave and live like other people?" (29)

She reminds Grant that he once left but came back.

> "…You remember that? You went to California to visit your mother and father—but you wouldn't stay. You couldn't stay. You had to come back. Why did you come back. Grant? Why? (30)

He does not answer her question.

In their second encounter, when he drops in on her at school, he repeats his desire to run away.

> Vivian shook her head. "You know you can't."
> "Why not?"
> "For the same reason you haven't done it yet."
> "I've wanted to."
> "But you haven't."
> "Why?"
> "You know the answer yourself, Grant. You love them more than you hate this place." (94)

This time she has replied for him.

In the next encounter, Vivian brings up that she has noticed that Irene, Grant's student assistant, is in love with him. Irene is a near parallel to Mary Louise from the first novel. In that case, Jackson's feelings toward Mary Louise went largely unexplored. In *The Lesson Before*

Dying, Vivian forces Grant to discuss Irene's feelings. It becomes the trigger for a long exposition by Grant on what this kind of love represents:

> "Irene and my aunt want from me what Miss Emma wants from Jefferson," I said. "I don't know if Miss Emma ever had anybody in her past that she could be proud of.
>
> "…And for my aunt and Irene it is the same. Who else does my aunt have?… And for Irene and for others here in the quarter it's the same. They look at their fathers, their grandfathers, their uncles, their brothers—all broken. They see me—and I, who grew up on that same plantation, can teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. I can give them something that neither a husband, a father, nor a grandfather ever did, so they want to hold on as long as they can. Not realizing that their holding on will break me too. That in order for me to be what they think I am, what they want me to be, I must run as the others have done in the past." I drank. "Now do you see? Do you see?" (166-7)

And when Vivian asks, "Will that circle ever be broken?" Grant replies, "It's up to Jefferson, my love." With that answer, Gaines has linked the question of Grant's own commitment to the community to his success or failure with Jefferson. Though Grant has been pushed into defending Jefferson, what Jefferson in turn teaches him is as much about love as it is about obligation.

Gaines did include a complication in the relationship between Grant and Vivian. She is involved in a divorce and her affair has to be conducted in secret, lest her ex-husband tries to get custody of her children. This could have been a sub-plot but Gaines does not take it in that direction. Instead it simply becomes a complication, tipping the scale in favor of Grant not being able to leave. Near the end of the novel, the ex-husband has demanded to see his children every weekend. Vivian cannot leave. And hence Grant has no easy route of escape.

Obligation

In both of Gaines's novels, the gap between love and obligation is small.

In *Catherine Carmier*, obligation comes up in the form of Jackson's response to his aunt Charlotte's love. It really is love, but he seems to feel it as obligation. He cannot really express it. He cannot do this even when Madame Bayonne, his former teacher, directly asks him.

> "Why did you come back, Jackson?" Madame Bayonne asked.
> "Pardon me?" he said.
> …
> "To tell her you could not come back?"
> "No, it wasn't exactly that. And maybe that was part of it." (78-9)

He says no more on the subject.

His response to Charlotte's love is a major plot line in this book. He has returned, planning to leave. She has prayed for his return and expects him to stay. His alienated behavior disturbs her, but she fights for him. Though we know very early on that he is planning to leave, we are delayed in finding out when and how he will tell his aunt.

When he finally tells her, she collapses and falls ill. She spurns him, and she and the other women use guilt to try to get him to stay. It doesn't work. Gaines resolves this tension using a helper character, in this case Reverend Armstrong. The preacher uses her love of God and the Church to ask her to set him free. He suggests that her love might be possessive and therefore un-Christian, an argument that he thought would be persuasive to her.

> "I'm a old woman. I'm old. Two more years—three more, the most. I ain't never had a thing. Is that too much I'm asking for?"
> …
> "Reverend, I love my boy. That's all I want in this life, Reverend; to love him."
> "To have him, Sister Charlotte. To have him."
> "Yes," she said. "Yes."
> "But that is not the Christian way."
> "To love?"
> ""Not to love. To love is. But to have, to possess."
> "I'll never get in his way. I just want him here with me. I'll never get in his way."
> "You can't have him here with you, Sister Charlotte. He must go back." (182)

Obligation – as a response to another's possessive love – also comes up in the form of Catherine's tie with Raoul, her mother Della and the farm. For much of the novel, she is torn between her love for Jackson and her love/obligation to Raoul and Della. But in the end, when she decides to stay, she unequivocally expresses where she stands:

"Go with him," Raoul said, with his head down. "It's over with."

…

"It's not over with, Daddy. You have stood this long. You can keep on standing. I'll stand beside you."

"You been the prop long enough."

"I don't mind being the prop, Daddy. I love my daddy. I don't mind being the prop." (244)

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the same pattern of obligation as response to love is revisited in the relationship between Grant and Tante Lou. She has accepted him here just so that he's here. The battles over his beliefs and practices, such as over his loss of faith in the church, are in the past. It is almost as if Tante Lou had succeeded in what Charlotte in the earlier novel had wished for. ("I just want him here with me. I'll never get in his way.")

And she has left him alone – until now. With Jefferson's conviction, Tante Lou accepts Miss Emma's request that Grant visit and teach Jefferson in the jail. Like Grant's question of whether to stay or leave, his relationship with his aunt is also wrapped up with the success or failure of his struggle with Jefferson. Grant grumbles and complains about his new task, but he agrees just the same. In a conversation he has with Jefferson, he indirectly expresses why.

> "Obligation?" I said. "Do you know what 'obligation' means?"
>
> …
>
> "No matter how bad off we are," I said, "we still owe something. You owe something, Jefferson. Not to me. Surely not to that sheriff out there. But to your godmother. You must show her some understanding, some kind of love."
>
> …
>
> ""I'm not trying to confuse you, Jefferson. She loves you, and I want you to give her something. Something that she can be proud of." (139)

But while Grant has been lecturing Jefferson, he seems to also be reminding himself. In this novel, Gaines uses another preacher as a helper character in resolving the growing tension between Grant and his aunt. Reverend Ambrose has a much larger role than this, because until now he has been arrayed as Grant's counterpoint in the community. Grant has succeeded with

Jefferson where the preacher failed. This caused some jealousy on the part of the preacher and the feeling on his part – not totally unjustified – that Grant looked down on him.

During a confrontation between the two, Grant says that he "doesn't owe anybody anything", the Reverend tears into him with a series of challenges, culminating in laying bare what Tante Lou has done for Grant:

> "She been lying every day of her life, your aunt in there. That's how you got through that university—cheating herself here, cheating herself there, but always telling you she's all right. I've seen her hands bleed from picking cotton. I've seen the blisters from the hoe and the cane knife. At that church, crying on her knees. You ever looked at the scabs on her knees, boy? Course you never. 'Cause she never wanted you to see it. And that's the difference between me and you, boy; that makes me the educated one, and you the gump. I know my people. I know what they gone through. I know they done cheated themselves, lied to themselves—hoping the one they all love and trust come back and help relieve the pain." (218)

Gaines also uses another helper character – from the past – to bring out Grant's feelings of obligation to the community. When Grant is teaching his class, he remembers scenes with Matthew Antoine, his former teacher. This man used to tell his students, including Jackson, that they were nothing, would amount to nothing, and they should run if they could. He of course had not run but stayed, and ended up being a bitter and alienated man. Matthew Antoine is also a mirror character, representing the end point where alienation from the community can take you. In Grant's mind, he is a challenge. He is determined to prove the dead teacher wrong.

Alienation

Jackson Bradley in *Catherine Carmier* is a walking embodiment of alienation. Gaines reinforces this sense using a myriad of scenes and repetition. We have also seen how Gaines uses a mirror character like Lillian to demonstrate alienation.

While there is a sense of dislocation in Jackson when he first arrives, the gulf he feels from the community he left behind is first revealed in detail at the party which Charlotte has

thrown for him. He walks among people but cannot really participate in their conversations, and they cannot engage with him.

> They did not know what to do around him. He had to make the first move. If he held out his hand, they took his hand. If he spoke to them, they spoke in return. If he smiled, they did also. But when he had shaken their hands, spoken to them, smiled with them, he could not think of another thing to say or to do, and neither could they. (66)

In Jackson's case, some of the distance he feels from his people is due to the gap in education. In the party, the only other person who has gone to college is Madame Bayonne, his former teacher, and this is the person with whom Jackson has his first real, open conversation. In this conversation, Jackson openly discloses that he is a lost soul. He cannot return to stay because he will not bow down to the reactionary social structure. In addition, he explains that he did not find welcome in the North either.

> "But when we went up there, we found it all a pile of lies. There was no truth in any of it. No truth at all." (80-81)

To her Jackson confides that he is a searching soul:

> "I'm like a leaf, Madame Bayonne, that's broken away from a tree. Drifting." (79)

Education is where Jackson places blame for his drift away from the values he once used to hold. This comes up in the confrontation between Grant and Charlotte over his having lost belief in the Church.

> He started not to say it, but he said it anyway. "You sent me there," he said. "I didn't want to go. I cried. I cried to keep from going. You wanted me to go. So I went. You wanted me to study, so I did."
>
> "Yes, I wanted you to go. I wanted you to study. I wanted you to get a good learning, the kind of learning you couldn't get here. But I didn't want you to forget God, Jackson. I didn't send you up there to do that."
>
> "I haven't forgotten God. But Christ, the church, I don't believe in that bourgeois farce –"
>
> Suddenly her hand came out and slapped him across the mouth. She had not intended to hit him. The hand had jerked forward to shut him up. (100)

The gulf created by education is also demonstrated in his interaction with Mary Louise:

> "See you been reading?" she said, nodding toward the yellow paperback book in the swing.
>
> "Tried to," Jackson said. "Didn't get too much of it done."
>
> "What is it? A story?"
>
> "Greek poetry," he said.
>
> She looked at the book a long time, as though she were trying to figure out the words. She had no idea what any word meant, and she looked at him and smiled. He smiled back, assuring her it really did not matter. She left the house. (168-9)

The strong sense of alienation Jackson feels – which confirms for him that he cannot stay – is reinforced by Gaines through use of repetition. One after another, people from the community describe that the area is dying, drying up, and that the young people are all leaving. Brother tells him this right as soon as he arrives. Madame Bayonne gives it a more analytical explanation. Other interactions in the book also bring out this social landscape, such as the conversations between Catherine and Lillian, and the preacher's attempts to persuade Charlotte to accept Jackson's departure. The social situation does not need to be repeated so much just to give us this information – Gaines appears to be using repetition to overwhelm us with this sensibility. So it is not at all surprising when Jackson feels the heavy hand of his dislocation:

> He did not like the way he was feeling. He was feeling empty. He did not like being empty—unable to recognize things, unable to associate himself with things. He did not like being unable to recognize the graves. He did not like being unable to associate with the people. He did not like being unable to go to church with his aunt, or to drink in the sideroom with Brother. (191)

Gaines even uses the repetition in the way he writes this paragraph. ("He did not like…")

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant's alienation is more a sense of burnout. The battles over values are in the past. Grant directly expresses his alienation in his conversations with Vivian. But Gaines dramatizes how Grant feels mainly through the scenes in the classroom:

> "…I had listened to them almost six years, and I knew who would say what, just as I knew what each child would wear to school, and who would or would not know his or her lesson. I knew, too, which of them would do something for themselves and which of them never would, regardless of what I did. So each day I listened for a moment, then turned it off and planned the rest of the day." (34)

Gaines also uses Grant's memories of Matthew Antoine, the old mulatto teacher, to paint a picture of extreme alienation, one that had bled into bitterness and self-hatred. Grant remembers Antoine as someone who had challenged him to run, but he has apparently stayed to prove the man wrong. When he remembers the dead teacher, Grant is at a moment where is almost willing to believe the old man was right. But of course his commitment to Jefferson shows that he continues to be driven by the urge to prove the man wrong.

> He had told us then that most of us would die violently, and those who did not would be brought down to the level of beasts. Told us that there was no other choice but to run and run. That he was living testimony of someone who should have run. That in him—he did not say all this, but we felt it—there was nothing but hatred for himself as well as contempt for us. He hated himself for the mixture of his blood and the cowardice of his being, and he hated us for daily reminding him of it. No, he did not tell us this, but daily he showed us this. As clearly as anything, he showed his hatred for himself, and for us. He could teach any of us only one thing, and that one thing was flight. (62-3)

Hostility

Returning to the South, a black person confronts the challenge of re-negotiating how s/he will deal with the racialized social structure of that region. In both of Gaines's novels, we are specifically dealing with the Jim Crow South (late 40s and late 50s/early 60s).

Catherine Carmier is a novel mostly confined to relations within the black community and the Creoles. White society – in this case, white Cajun society – lies in the background, as the world holding power and privilege. Right from the start, we are told – in the mouths of several characters – what is happening in this area.

Jackson absorbs these stories. But Gaines does not spend much space using scenes to dramatize Jackson's interaction with the white world. Only once do we see him react to the social codes of this world that he detests. He has gone out with Brother to the store.

> "How about a beer?" Brother said. "On me."
> "Maybe some other time."

> He wanted a beer. He needed one badly. But he would have to go to a sideroom to get it. The storekeeper sold beer to whites inside the store, but not to Negroes. Negroes could buy and drink theirs in a small room to the side. Jackson had not gone to the sideroom since coming here. (173-4)

Someone like Jackson, who is back for a short visit, might be able to avoid too many encounters with white power. But in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant Wiggins, who is living and working here, obviously cannot, even if he tries to minimize the extent of those dealings. What is more, interaction with the white power structure is central to this story. He has to bow and scrape not just because he is a schoolteacher, but because of the task he has agreed to do.

Gaines dramatizes this interaction with a number of scenes.

Grant has to go through the back door at Pichot's; he is forced to wait for hours before they will see him; he is forced to be meek in front of the Sheriff; and he is forced to wait at Edwin's where he goes to buy the radio for Jefferson. In a couple of these scenes, Gaines touches on language and how blacks are expected to speak in white company. When Grant has gone to Pichot's to hear whether the Sheriff will allow him to visit Jefferson in prison, there is this exchange:

> "She's old," I said. "She doesn't feel that she has the strength to come up there all the time."
>
> "She doesn't, huh?" Sam Guidry asked me. He emphasized "doesn't." I was supposed to have said, "don't." I was being too smart.
>
> "Yes, sir" I said. "She doesn't feel that she can."
>
> I used the word "doesn't" again, but I did it intentionally this time. If he had said I was being too smart and he didn't want me to come to that jail, my mind would definitely have been relieved. (48)

In this instance, Grant is mildly defiant, because he has only reluctantly taken up his aunt's request. He would not mind being turned down for being uppity. But in a later incident, where he is on the verge of success with Jefferson and actually excited about his responsibility,

he is willing to bow. On his return to the prison with the radio, there is this exchange with the Sheriff:

> "Leave it," the sheriff said. "I'll see that he gets it. Batries, I hope."
> "Yes, sir, batries," I said. I had almost said "batteries." (177)

Unlike *Catherine Carmier*, where the incident at the store was relatively detached from the plot lines of the novel, the encounters with white society in *A Lesson Before Dying* are closely braided with the other plot lines. For instance, what he has to endure in meeting his aunt's request increases the cleavage between Grant and her:

> "Everything you sent me to school for, you're stripping me of it," I told my aunt…. "The humiliation I had to go through, going into that man's kitchen. The hours I had to wait while they ate and drank and socialized before they would even see me. Now going up to that jail. To watch them put their dirty hands on that food. To search my body each time as if I'm some kind of common criminal. Maybe today they'll want to look into my mouth, or my nostrils, or make me strip. Anything to humiliate me. All the things you wanted me to escape by going to school. Years ago, Professor Antoine told me that if I stayed here, they were going to break me down to the nigger I was born to be. But he didn't tell me that my aunt would help them do it."
> …
> "I'm sorry, Mr. Grant, I'm helping them white people to humiliate you. I'm so sorry. And I wished they had somebody else we could turn to. But they ain't nobody else." (79)

Conclusion

While *A Lesson Before Dying* is not a sequel to *Catherine Carmier*, the repetition of certain similar characters and patterns suggests that it is more a re-imagining of what might have become of the characters in the first novel had Jackson Bradley returned home to stay.

Catherine Carmier is a novel of profound alienation, though at the end, with Catherine's character the emotional shading of the book shifts toward a kind of love and commitment.

Jackson remains an alienated person from start to finish. He has been cast adrift by leaving home for college. He has returned home at odds with everything around him: community, family, religion. The spark of romance with Catherine draws him in, but it never

makes him even consider that he should stay. He wants her, but more than her, he wants to be away from this place. But this love seems mostly based on memory, chemistry, and its forbidden nature. Though Catherine responds, such a love is not enough for her.

At the close of the novel, all the main characters – even though they have chosen or accept the choices life has thrown to them – are left in an unhappy, torn state of being. Jackson will leave, but leave unhappy because Catherine does not go with him. Charlotte has come to accept her nephew's departure, but she is left heartbroken. Though Raoul manages to keep Catherine, he is a humbled man, Catherine's refusal to leave suggests that her love and her commitment to Raoul's heroic stand in life counts more than the dream of a new life with Jackson. But this comes at a cost, the loss of this possibility of personal happiness for herself.

In contrast, *A Lesson Before Dying* is a novel of renewed love and commitment. It begins with Grant feeling burned out after years of spinning his wheels as a teacher in a segregated school. But the drama of the novel encompasses a struggle, albeit one in which he reluctantly gets involved, to make a difference in the life of a condemned man. He gets through to Jefferson and his feeling of connection to his lover, his aunt, and his community are all reinvigorated. In the course of this struggle, the cleavages between himself and his people have both come out in sharper relief and, in the end, also created the possibility of being mended. Though we end the novel in a sad place – with a man unjustly executed by the white power structure – the book also leaves us with a sense of hope for the people. A man like Grant Wiggins can make a difference and blessed is the community that has such a person in its midst.

We have the same type of protagonist, some other similar characters, situations and patterns – and the same themes of love, obligation, alienation and hostility faced by our returnee

character – but the predominant sense evoked by Gaines in the two novels is weighted in opposite directions.

Besides how the themes are treated by way of complexity of both characterization and plot, there is considerable maturing in how Gaines develops his structural skills.

In the first novel, some of the relationships which Gaines uses as his building blocks stand almost separate from one another, and the plot lines are parallel. For example, the relationship between Jackson and Charlotte is almost a separate story than the one between Jackson and Catherine. The potential lying in helper characters like Brother and Mary Louise is left unused. By the end of Part II of the novel, Charlotte, Brother, Mary Louise – all the characters representing the drama of love, family obligation and alienation from family and community – are abandoned. Part III solely devotes itself to the main plot line involving forbidden love, and it tends to become more Catherine's story than Jackson's.

I did wonder if the disjointed structure of the earlier novel could be related to the alienation of the protagonist. If you have a returned-home character feeling distanced from a lot of what he finds around him, could it not be that many of the characters he runs into might be left unexplored and his relations with them be treated as parallel lines? This might have been true if the novel was written from a single (Jackson's) point of view. However, *Catherine Carmier* is written from a shifting third person point of view. It almost tries to appear omniscient. In such a case, the disjointedness feels more like the weakness of a first novel where the writer has yet to sharpen his structural skills.

In the later novel, Gaines has developed the technique of braiding. All the themes and main and secondary plotlines are interwoven. The main example is how the question of whether Grant will leave or stay – a theme bound up with his relationship to Tante Lou, to Vivian and

the community – is dependent on the course of his struggle to get through to Jefferson. As a result of the braiding technique, helper characters play a larger role. So characters, motifs, themes, plot lines do not feel as islands. It is worth exploring if perhaps Gaines does not go far enough: a number of the secondary characters and relationships could be developed further and the tension among them heightened. But it would have needed delicate handling lest the book lose its focus and compactness, which to me is part of the success of the novel.

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