**Student’s name**

**Course id**

**Submitted to**

**Date**

**“A lesson before death”**

Gaines wrote this book in 1993; it is almost entirely fictitious, even though he made use of various elements and related events from the period described. He tells the story in a pleasantly languid style that excellently suggests the immobility of the southern society and the oppressive heat in which the drama takes place (Jones, 1997). The fact that the novel is so astonishingly strong is mainly because Gaines of his protagonist, the teacher, has not made a bold hero, not a passionate fighter against injustice, but a doubting intellectual who feels himself beyond his environment. He really wants nothing more than to leave, not only because of self-evident racism, but also because of the equally stifling faith of his black fellow citizens. In fact, his love for the beautiful Vivian seems to concern him more than the imminent execution. What also helps is that Gaines lets his protagonist raise his voice against that injustice only in a single passage. Precisely because of that often neutral-descriptive tone, which sometimes sounds dull, this almost forgotten book makes a big impression.

The widely lauded book **“lesson before dying”** describes the relationship between a young black man on death row and his teacher in the America of the forties. When the black young man Jefferson is sentenced to death after he has been wrongly accused of the murder of a white cafe man, village teacher Grant Wiggins, under pressure from his environment, takes on the task of escorting him on death row. Wiggins is a bitter man trained for an Afro-American. He silently opposes both the segregation, the realization that he cannot change anything, and against his own background. The only moderately pious intellectual who prefers James Joyce to read the Bible hates his job and has a deep rooted resentment towards his cultural and social heritage, without being able to change it. His restrained anger only comes when he hears two mulattos of racist language in a pub and almost kills them. Ever since his lawyer called him "a pig" during his defense, Jefferson started to consider himself as such. However, his godmother Miss Emma wants him to face his death as a man. Jefferson has little to the lessons of the pious, simple village pastor. Wiggins, however, knows, in spite of himself, that he can finally see that he is a full-fledged person and that he can withdraw from his depression and self-hatred. This book is a poignant narrative about the segregated America of the forties, an icon from the African-American writing of grandmaster Ernest J. Gaines.

The book does not offer a good outcome, but examines human dignity in a harsh world in which the cards are ruthlessly unfairly distributed. And although the story takes place specifically in the southern states before the civil rights movement of the sixties, we all know that a boy like Jefferson is now, in the new millennium, an easy target of a deeply prejudiced justice system in every part of America. The discussion that the book raises about the unequal distribution of power, in which white men decide the fate of black boys, is painfully topical. In the book, Gaines connects that historical awareness with an unrelenting timelessness. The tension between these two elements, although in a very different form, also arises with the character of Jefferson's teacher, Grant Wiggins. Wiggins is sent to the young Jefferson, while he is already on death row, to learn how to die as an honorable man. Wiggins resists his task, which he experiences as useless. He is driven by a desire for individualism and freedom, but must ultimately recognize that he cannot separate himself from where he comes from. For who are we, if we reject the place that has formed us? In Wiggins a struggle with identity is shown that is completely recognizable, especially now, in a time characterized by large migration flows and societies that are struggling with identity crises.

Gain's deep sense of human grief creates an atmosphere of silent and ever-present threat in a lesson before death. It is a silence under which it rushes. Young Jefferson cannot escape his fate, however unjustly that is. But in the maelstrom of inevitable events a lesson is needed. Namely that our humanity is inextricably linked to a sense of self-worth. A lesson before death is thus a story that elevates human dignity above time and place. A white liquor trader is killed in a robbery involving three black boys. One of them, Jefferson, survives the incident, and maintains during the trial that he was present by chance. We write the forties, in the still segregated Louisiana. The young man therefore has no chance and is sentenced to death by a jury of white men. The godmother of Jefferson is present at the session but registers, especially because she already knows the outcome, but one thing: that the word 'pig' falls in the description of her stepson. She manages to persuade Grant Wiggins, the only black intellectual in the town, to visit Jefferson in prison and to make sure he dies like a man, not like an animal. Wiggins initially opposes the assignment and initially does not see any perspective in Jefferson's passive attitude. Only when he has given him a notepad with a pencil does the practically illiterate boy get out of his lethargy and start writing. But Wiggins also gives him a radio, and that leads to a high-level conflict with the black preacher of the town. After all, Jefferson 'needs God in the cell, and not that sin box.' The fact that Wiggins ultimately achieves what the godmother asked him, despite the predictably bad outcome, feels like a small victory.

**Works cited**

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