A Lesson Before Dying: Faith, Hope, And Love In A Novel

A Lesson Before Dying by Ernest J. Gaines is a novel set in a small Cajun community in Bayonne Louisiana during the late 1940s. The main character, Jefferson, is convicted for a crime he did not commit and is set to be executed. The plot follows the story of two black men, Jefferson and Grant, as they struggle to live in a society that is segregated and deeply racist. Throughout the story, Gaines draws parallels between the characters in A Lesson Before Dying and those in the Bible. He uses these biblical allusions to highlight the importance of faith and hope, but most importantly love.

Gaines likens the life of Jefferson to Jesus to imply that the rest of the community should place their faith in him. As the plot develops, many subtle similarities between Jefferson and Jesus are revealed, such as the facts that they were both innocent and were executed alongside two robbers, or that they were both executed between noon and three. However, there are larger and more important connections between these two characters, that are critical to understanding the novel. The most crucial similarity between these two men is that both Jefferson and Jesus are heroes. On page 191, Grant explains what it means to be a hero, and that Jefferson is a hero. “A hero does for others. He would do anything for the people he loves because he knows it would make their lives better.” By this definition, both Jefferson and Jesus are heroes, because they both make sacrifices and base their actions off of the people they love. This is why people place their faith in them, because they know that even if the odds are against them, they will have someone to help guide them.

Just as Paul the Apostle is seen as a figure of hope in the Bible, Deputy Paul Bonin stands as a symbol of hope in A Lesson Before Dying. After the death of Jesus Christ, Paul the apostle traveled thousands of miles around the Mediterranean, spreading Christianity and the word of Jesus. When Jefferson dies, Deputy Paul is also the one to spread the news. In this interaction he has with Grant, he sticks his hand out to Jefferson and offers to be friends — a gesture that clearly shows a change in power dynamics, from the beginning to the end of the novel. “Paul stuck out his hand. ‘Allow me to be your friend, Grant Wiggins. I don’t ever want to forget this day. I don’t ever want to forget him’” (255). Although this gesture may seem trivial, it is, in fact, crucial to understanding the novel. While the book ends on a depressing note, with Jefferson dead for a crime he didn’t commit and Grant grieving, we still see this glimmer of hope presented in the scene described above. The fact that Deputy Paul, a white man, sticks out his hand and asks to be friends with Grant shows how this continuous cycle of segregation, can be broken with one kind gesture.

Although Miss Emma is often a more underlooked character, she is the most important, which is why she can be seen as having the role of God in the novel. In the very beginning of the book, Miss Emma is described as a “great immobile stone”. This is a reference to how God is a safety rock. “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; my God is my rock, in whom I find protection. He is my shield, the power that saves me, and my place of safety. (Psalm 18:2)” Miss Emma is Jefferson’s rock. She is strong, solid and, unchanging. Although Jefferson doesn’t recognize nor appreciate it, Miss Emma is the only character that never gives up faith in him. She continues to love and support him, even when few do. Similarly to how Miss Emma acts as a parent to Jefferson, God acts as Jesus’s parental figure and guides Jesus to make

the decisions that he does. God is the motivating factor that allows Jesus to die and free people from their sins, and Miss Emma is the motivating factor that allows Jefferson to die with dignity, and in turn, allows the community to break free from the cycle of racism and segregation.

By drawing these character parallels, Gaines has us reflect on the importance of faith, hope, and love and leads us to recognize that the most important of these is love. A quote from the Bible states “faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:4-13, NIV)” This is because faith and hope are individual, whereas love is something that is always beneficial to another. Love is what lead Miss Emma to help Jefferson, it is what allowed her to have faith in him. Love is what drove Grant to continue to visit Jefferson even when he had lost hope. Using biblical allusions highlights the heroism of Jefferson, implants a sense of hope in the reader, and shows the importance of love. Gaines displays that love is an instinctive human emotion that motivates us to make sacrifices and choices for the benefit of others.