A Lesson Before Dying: Racial Issues

Introduction

In the novel A Lesson Before Dying, the story follows the main character ,Grant Wiggins, as he deals with prejudice, both internally and externally. Within the novel, there are multiple individuals who feel a sense of superiority over the rest based on certain factors, the factors I will be focusing on will be race and education. Race plays a big defining role in the novel, not only black and white, but light skinned or biracial blacks and dark skinned blacks. African-Americans with a lighter skin complexion would regard themselves as being superior in regards to those of darker skin, even though they were still considered to be the same by the white people. Education is more nuanced in comparison to the obvious race issue, but there is a sense that those with a higher education are regarded as superior to the others in the quarter. Particularly the teachers of the quarter are get respected more than a regular colored worker. The superiority complexes affect their views on Jefferson's case, and on what justice looks like.

Then

There are many instances within the book where race has been a dividing factor between the characters in the book. Not only was this a major part of the book but was part of the times historically, in which the book is based on. Whites have always been held in a higher regard than those of African decent, but the characters also face racism within the black community. In chapter 15, Tante Lou even says that the neighborhood that Vivian is from is known not to like dark skinned folks(Gaines, 1993). This racism shapes how the different racial groups view Jefferson in regards to his charges. The whites believe he is guilty without a doubt and should die for his crimes, the light skin believe he should die because he is dark skinned, and the blacks think that regardless of whether he did it or not he is going to die because someone has to(Gaines, 1993). Another example would be Matthew Antoine, Grants old teacher. Matthew believed that his skin color made him superior to everyone in the quarter and that is why he stayed according to him(Gaines, 1993). His sense of superiority over those darker than him was strengthened by the fact that the white people still counted him as black and inferior(Gaines, 1993). Throughout the novel, Grant is depicted as being respected because of the fact that he went to university and was able to get a higher education than most people in the quarter. Teachers are seen as superior, and become judgemental of those beneath them. Education is seen as a dangerous thing for a colored person to possess in these times, this can be seen in almost all of the interactions that Grant has with white people of authority. He has to be smart enough to be taken seriously, but not too smart as to offend them(Gaines, 1993).

Now

If the roles had been switched, and Jefferson were an educated, white man, with a well off family, who had been caught at the scene of the murder if a black store owner, things may not have gone so smoothly. He would not have been given death so easily, because he would have the acceptable background and support in which to relieve him. This is still true today, people get away with crimes based on their race and educational backgrounds. A white male or female

is more likely to get away with a crime than a male or female of a minority, accused of the same crime is. This is why some minorities still hold the thought that, if it came down to them or a white person and they had both been sought for the same crime, the minority would be the one to take the fall because historically this has been the case for many and continues to happen.

Conclusion

In A Lesson Before Dying, Gaines makes evident the different perspectives that different races held on Jefferson's innocence. Although, we the audience knew that he was innocent of the charges brought against him, prejudice and racism sealed his fate long before the verdict was passed. In Gaine's time, skin tone and education were only two prevalent dividing factors among many, that influenced how colored people were treated and seen by other races and by each other. In today's American justice system, the same can be said about prejudice and racism influencing judicial outcomes. The justice system will never be perfect, but that does not mean that it should not attempt to be the fairest it can be, and provide everyone regardless of age, race or any other factor the same privileges.

References

1. Gaines, Ernest J.(1993) A Lesson Before Dying. New York: Knopf Publishing Group