Race/racism In “Still I Rise” And “A Lesson Before Dying”

The poem “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou and the novel “A Lesson Before Dying” by Ernest J. Gaines explore what it means to condemn hatred while maintaining a positive attitude. Both texts demonstrate the universal idea of overcoming prejudice, specifically the suffering of African-Americans throughout history. A theme statement that is common to both poem and novel is “A person’s past history does not have to influence the current mindset they choose to live by”. I believe this effectively clarifies the theme of race/racism because both narrators chose not to be broken down by society, which provides hope to future generations and encourages them to take action against discrimination.

First, in “Still I Rise”, the narrator points out that words have no power over her and uses strong figurative language such as similes to compare her “rising” to various elements, like dust or air. Her confidence and positive attitude remains undefeated, even through obstacles or challenges she faces every day. The powerful comparaisons of the certainty of nature such as moons and suns with resilience and determination truly captures the natural willingness of this woman. She states how society would like to see her weak or broken, again utilizing compelling figurative language with similes and personification to illustrate her confidence being shattered in the lines, “Shoulders falling down like teardrops, weakened by my soulful cries” (Angelou 15-16). In fact, she is confronting those attempting to beat her down or oppose her and reminding them that she will still rise. The repetition of the words “I’ll rise” creates a memory in the reader’s head that won’t be forgotten, because of its influential meaning. This is where the prevalent theme of race/racism is introduced, because of the narrator’s struggles as an African-American person. She compares herself to a “black ocean” (32) in order to provide a racial distinction which is not common in society. In reality, what is gained through her perseverance is the dreams and hopes of her ancestors.

In “A Lesson Before Dying”, however, the narrator Grant Wiggins is determined to help Jefferson rise through the final weeks of his life, which means to die as a man. The racism in pre-civil rights Louisiana has a very discrete pattern of injustice in society, yet Grant seems to hold himself at a higher standard. He is teaching in an impoverished country school for blacks, and this confidence he possesses from being educated becomes the main reason why Jefferson progresses throughout the novel. Even though all the expectations based on race (occupation, social status, gender) impact this community, they still manage to find a purpose and continue to fight these prejudices. This is seen at the end of the novel when Jefferson approaches his execution as a man, because of the values Grant instilled upon him. The connection between Jefferson and Grant was bound by a relationship that encouraged growth in each other, while combating society’s expectations. This short term commitment to Jefferson’s progression opened up a display of emotional vulnerability by Grant, which made a visible impact on all the characters around him. Jefferson’s lack of freedom as a black man was conceptual and physical, because of his imprisonment and mental confinement from a young age. This determination to struggle proves that it is more dignified than giving into fate, and that we should leave this world the same way we came in: fighting for life. The intensity and power of a familial bond overshadows any type of racism, which is what Grant and Jefferson were able to achieve at the end of this novel.