Black Manhood in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

In *Visions for Black Men*, Na 'im Akbar (1991) analyzes the developmental phases for manhood, while offering a specifically African American perspective to his discussion. Because Akbar believes that black males have particular social issues to confront, their manhood will be defined quite differently from that of their white counterparts. According to Akbar, “Our power is not in the utilization of any Western theory of power.... The only power that will be our power will be power that will emerge out of our definitional system of what is powerful and the utilization of those resources that are our own” (p. 19). Arguing that definitions of black manhood must address the complexities of black male identity within a decidedly racist environment, Akbar insists that “we [must] understand that as soon as an African man stands up and declares himself to be a man, he has put himself in absolute and immediate opposition to the European system, which has defined him by their definitions as less than a man or as not a man” (p. 27).

Defining African American manhood is the dominant theme in Ernest J. Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), an important novel in which Gaines questions the validity of applying Eurocentric definitions of manhood to black male identity and presents Afrocentric alternatives (quite similar to Akbar’s) to defining black manhood. In so doing, Gaines empowers his protagonist duo by encouraging each of them to reject preconceived

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This article attempts to analyze the methods that black men have used to combat oppressive circumstances. The thesis is simple: black manhood and white manhood can coexist, even when, historically, the mere presence of the latter has threatened the existence of the former. Critiquing Gaines’s novel, one discovers a functional “script” for defining the role of black manhood. Protagonist Grant Wiggins discovers that given the inequality that permeates the South, an inequality reliant on black defeat, he must rediscover “self” as subject and no longer as object.
notions of who they are to be and to accept communal (African based) views of themselves.

That Gaines uses two men to serve as protagonist indicates his appreciation for the shared commitment of black folk as he adapts the typical protagonist/antagonist model to suit his purpose of redefining the African American experience. The novel charts the development of these two men, Grant Wiggins and young Jefferson, as they form a bond of empathy and brotherhood while awaiting the fateful day when Jefferson, wrongly accused of murder, is to be executed. Grant Wiggins, the school teacher on the Pichot plantation, has been challenged with the task of transforming Jefferson into a man during his incarceration. Grant's Aunt Lou and Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma, insist that Grant prove to Jefferson that he is not the hog that the defense attorney has labeled him during the closing remarks of Jefferson's trial. Miss Emma wants Jefferson to defy this egregious characterization and to afford her a brief period of pride before she, too, succumbs to death.

Though the plot hinges on Grant's success with Jefferson, who has come to view himself as being less than an animal, the novel is as concerned with Grant's developing manhood as it is with Jefferson's. This important factor in the novel is indicative of the communal base of black manhood. Instead of the dichotomous European model (whereby one's manhood is dependent on the ability to deny the manhood of another, or the competition model), the African model insists upon camaraderie and shared responsibility, which results in a strengthened group manhood. One strong black man makes all black men strong, while one weak black man threatens the whole group. The permanence of Grant's manhood is dependent upon his success with Jefferson. According to Akbar, "the mind of a real 'man' begins to breed a kind of consciousness that propels people into a higher realization of who they are" (p. 15). Therefore, when Grant propels Jefferson "into a higher realization of who [he is]," then he, himself, will be elevated to manhood.

If Grant is to transform Jefferson, both of them must dismiss European definitions of self. Specifically, they must deny the relevance of the defense attorney's words when the attorney insists that Jefferson does not meet the criteria of American manhood:

*He does not even know the size of his clothes or his shoes. Ask him to name the months of the year. Ask him does Christmas come before or after the Fourth of July? Mention the names of Keats, Byron, Scott, and see whether the eyes will show one moment of recognition. Ask him to describe a rose, to quote one passage from the Constitution or the Bill of Rights. (p. 8).*