

Gift Exchange as Communal Resistance in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

by Scott Thomas Gibson

Scott Thomas Gibson is the Coordinator of the School of Languages and Literature at La Universidad San Francisco in Quito, Ecuador, where he teaches courses in American literatures and writing. He is currently at work on projects about masculinity and material culture in African American literature. Contact: stgibson@usfq.edu.ec

<https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue11/Gift-Exchange-as-Communal-Resistance-in-Ernest-Gaines-Lesson-Before-Dying>

Abstract:

This article examines the representation of gift exchange in Ernest Gaines's novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*. Drawing upon sociological and anthropological theories of the gift, it argues that gift exchange among the black community in the fictional town of Bayonne provides a mechanism of resistance to racial oppression in the Jim Crow South. The analysis first traces the history convergence of market and gift economies under slavery and the impact of these economic structures on African American dehumanization through the Jim Crow era. It then explores how *A Lesson Before Dying* reclaims gift exchange as a subversive practice that allows Jefferson, a man sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit, to reclaim his sense of manhood and reintegrate him into Bayonne's black community. Ultimately, the novel prompts consideration of how gifts undermine systemic oppression in a racialized market economy.

Keywords: resistance, gift exchange, Ernest Gaines, literature, community

Copyright Information: *NANO: New American Notes Online* by <https://nanocrit.com> is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

“Do you know what ‘obligation’ means?” In Ernest Gaines’s novel *A Lesson Before Dying*, the schoolteacher Grant Wiggins asks this question to a young man named Jefferson who has been condemned for a murder he did not commit (139). Set in the racially-segregated fictional town of Bayonne, Louisiana in the late 1940s, the novel recounts the efforts of the local black community to restore Jefferson’s sense of manhood during the seven months between his conviction and his impending execution. Having come to view himself as a “hog,” however, Jefferson rejects the idea that he is capable of being morally indebted to his community. “That’s for youmans,” he replies to Grant. “I ain’t no youman” (139). When Grant points out that his ability to speak belies his assertion of being a “hog,” Jefferson simply doubles down: “Hogs don’t give nothing. Hogs don’t leave nothing” (139).

This question of Jefferson’s “obligation” to “give” to his community and its relationship to his perception of himself as a “hog” are indicative of broader questions about social obligation and racial oppression raised in the novel. As the anthropologist Marcel Mauss has observed, gifts entangle each possessor in a network of mutual indebtedness, wherein members of a society negotiate status and power. To Mauss, gifts actuate the circulation of symbolic capital, “a succession of rights and duties to consume and reciprocate, corresponding to rights and duties to offer and accept” (14). Implicitly, Jefferson poses the question: how can a hog consciously engage in a human community by receiving a gift, let alone giving one in return? Conversely, readers might ask: how would Jefferson’s participation in gift exchange fundamentally disrupt the white-controlled legal and economic systems that rendered him a hog in the first place?

In this essay, I argue that *A Lesson Before Dying* represents gift exchange as a practice of black communal resistance that subverts institutionalized oppression enabled by white-controlled legal institutions and market economies. Through subversive gift exchange practices, the black residents of Bayonne not only restore Jefferson’s manhood but also defiantly reincorporate him into the local black community. To that end, I first demonstrate how the novel signifies on the history of gift exchange as a mechanism of racial subjugation under slavery. By casting Jefferson as a hog incapable of giving and receiving, the novel recalls the dehumanization of enslaved African Americans as chattel that precluded their willful participation in reciprocal exchange. Then, I illustrate how the acts of giving and receiving gifts restore Jefferson’s manhood by reincorporating him into the local black community. In this way, gift exchange supplants market notions of debt and credit that led to Jefferson’s imprisonment and dehumanization with a resilient moral economy of mutual indebtedness.

Such a reading depends on the assumption that gifts and commodities do not operate independently of each other but instead represent two interrelated economic practices. In other words, the subversive potential of gift exchange implies its ability to transform broader socioeconomic institutions and practices. In this way, my analysis departs from Mauss’s

depiction of market economies and gift exchange as discrete systems. As Pierre Bourdieu explains, gift exchange simply appears distinctive from market exchange through its masking of its inherent economic calculations. For Bourdieu, this masking is generated by the interval of exchange between the gift and counter-gift (*Outline 6*). Unlike barter or sale when the terms of the exchange are explicit, “the giver’s undeclared calculation must reckon with the receiver’s undeclared calculation, and hence satisfy his expectations without appearing to know what they are” (*Outline 171*). In other words, gifting carries out its primary function of catalyzing social relations by obscuring its underlying economic motives. Furthermore, as Arjun Appadurai argues, an object may vacillate between its role as a commodity or gift depending on the context of its exchange: “the commodity situation in the social life of any ‘thing’” is that in which its “exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (13). Any “thing,” then, is a potential commodity, but its commodification represents only a “phase” in its “social life” (13). For Appadurai, treating commodity and gift exchange as mutually exclusive practices not only romanticizes “small-scale societies” but also falsely “correlat[es] zones of social intimacy too rigidly with distinct forms of exchange” (11, 22). It is on this last point that my analysis hinges: gift exchange in Gaines’s novel does not merely represent an oppositional alternative to the legal and economic conditions that lead to Jefferson’s conviction and social exclusion. Instead, it operates as an act of communal resistance *through* its engagement with and subversion of the dominant, racialized market economy of Bayonne.

A Lesson Before Dying establishes this interrelationality between gift and market economies by signifying on the role that gift exchange played in sustaining the chattel slavery economy of the United States. Although the novel is set in the Jim Crow South during the 1940s, it evokes this historical purview through its depiction of Jefferson’s dehumanizing process during his trial.



[Fig. 1: The Trial, author's screenshot of 1999 HBO film version of *A Lesson Before Dying*]

Jefferson's perception of himself as a hog who is unfit to belong to a human moral community stems from his defense attorney's twisted attempt to exonerate his client through racist assumptions of black moral and intellectual inferiority. Jefferson, he argues, lacks the capacity to have planned and executed the crime. According to the attorney, Jefferson is "a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn," but not someone who can plan a murder. "What justice would there be to take his life?" he asks the jury of white men. "I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this" (7-8). Nonetheless, the jury summarily convicts him, and the judge sentences him to death, "seeing no reason that he should not pay for the part he played in this horrible crime" (9).

By referring to Jefferson as a hog, the attorney's legal argument recalls the oppositional status of white manhood and black chattel that structured racial property relations in the American slaveholding system. In this way, the novel implies that the local Bayonne economy in the 1940s is still yoked to this slaveholding past. Jefferson cannot be held accountable as a man because he is, according to the attorney, little more than chattel. This historical continuity between slavery and the socioeconomic order of the Jim Crow South is made explicit shortly after Jefferson's conviction: the economy of Bayonne consists of a few local industries, including "a cement plant, a sawmill, and a slaughterhouse, mostly for hogs" (25).

Furthermore, Jefferson is condemned for the murder of a white shopkeeper, Alcee Gropé, who refuses credit to a group of black men, including Jefferson and his friends, Brother and Bear. In this scene, credit is a socially disruptive concept because it threatens the stability of Bayonne's racial hierarchy. This disruption stems in part from the issuance of credit as an ambiguous practice that is neither purely gift nor commodity. As C.A. Gregory explains, "commodity exchange is an exchange of alienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal independence," and "noncommodity (gift) exchange is an exchange of inalienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal dependence" (6). Credit, however, confounds these distinctions. As such, Bear's request for credit challenges Gropé's dominance as a white man. To accept the credit from the black men, Gropé would have to concede his position of power over them as black men and admit to a relationship of "reciprocal dependence," however tenuously, across racial lines. The denial of credit, then, extends to a denial of Jefferson's manhood: like the hogs bred for the market, it marks him for slaughter.

This relationship between Jefferson's dehumanization as a hog and the denial of social reciprocity between black and white men in the novel has its origins in the use of gift-giving as a mechanism of control under slavery. While slaves were often compelled to accept gifts from their masters, the possibility of agency and choice in the act of receiving or rejecting a gift threatened to destabilize the legal distinction between white men and black chattel. In fact, gift exchange was directly incorporated into the market economy of slavery, as evinced in both the historical record and literary depictions of gift-giving in slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* and Louis Hughes's *Thirty Years a Slave*. As historian Kenneth Greenberg argues, the ability to give gifts "was a distinguishing mark of men of honor and of masters" that represented a white slaveholder's social status and power among

his peers (65). Slaveholders also gave gifts to their slaves, but the practice was generally unidirectional; slaves could not easily reciprocate without challenging the slaveholder's authority by creating conditions in which the slaveholder becomes morally indebted to his property. As such, the "language of the gift was frequently the language of mastery" (66).

Such strategic uses of gifts were most evident during holidays. As Arthur Raboteau explains, slaveholders granted a certain permissiveness and frivolity, especially at Christmastime. Slaveholders routinely allowed slaves to request small gifts from their masters and indulged them in feasts and liquor (224). While such practices seemingly expressed the slaveholder's generosity, they also served as a form of social control. As Frederick Douglass describes in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, participation in holiday festivities was virtually compulsory: "a slave who would work during the holidays" was considered "undeserving of holidays" and their masters' "favor" (252). Douglass characterizes such festivities as fraudulent diversions calculated to subdue discontented slaves rather than express the slaveholder's benevolence. Consequently, he concludes that Christmas celebrations were "among the most effective means [...] of keeping down the spirit of insurrection among the slaves" (253).

This dynamic of giving and receiving gifts is further complicated by the fact that even compulsory acceptance of a gift presumes a challenge to the legal status of the slave as an alienable commodity. In short, a slaveholder cannot give things to a thing. For the master to offer a gift, he must tacitly concede that the slave, as the recipient of the gift, also has the right to possess and enjoy it. Yet the master cannot acknowledge that right, lest he recognize the slave as a person. Compulsory acceptance, then, masks the impossibility of giving a gift to chattel property. For this reason, Douglass sees no difference between the master's ostensible generosity during the holidays and their methods of punishment for a perceived ingratitude during the rest of the year, such as in cases when a master punishes a slave by forcing him to consume an excess of the thing he steals. In both situations, the compulsory consumption is intended to cure slaves of the "disagreeable and inconvenient practice of asking for more" (256). In this way, gifting rituals under slavery did not promote communal reciprocity between master and slave but instead constituted a mechanism of reinforcing racial oppression.

The discourse of credit at the beginning of the novel, Jefferson's rejection of moral obligation to his community, and the nascent gift economy that emerges during Jefferson's incarceration, collectively call out and subvert this historically nefarious use of gift exchange to construct a racist socioeconomic order. What slaveholders practiced was not really gift-giving but a form of compulsory consumption. After all, gifts presume giving and receiving as matters of human volition exercised within the constraints of specific social systems, volition that, of course, is expressly denied to slaves in their interactions with white slaveholders. As Bourdieu explains, gift exchange is neither compulsory nor free, but rather, a "provocation to reply" in which the "receiver [...] has to choose a line of conduct which, whatever he does, will be a response (even if only by default) to the provocation of the initial act. He can choose to prolong the exchange or to break it off. If, obedient to the point of honour, he opts for exchange, his choice is identical with his opponent's initial choice: he agrees to play the game, which can go on for ever, for the riposte is in itself a new challenge" (*Outline* 12). Even in cases when the giver and receiver

occupy different social ranks, they may still participate in the game of uncertainty that characterizes gift exchange. Slaveholders and slaves, however, merely simulated the game of gift-exchange, as the socioeconomic system of chattel slavery precluded the slave from exercising such choices.

In contrast, the representation of gift exchange that takes place during Jefferson's incarceration provides the novel's central counternarrative to the dehumanizing and alienating effects of the market economy on Bayonne's black community. Unlike market economies that generate inequitable conditions through the inherent risks of profit and loss, gift economies foster moral reciprocity within inequitable conditions by restoring balance and social ties to promote voluntary and supportive social relationships. According to David Cheal, moral economies "exist alongside political economies" to foster trust, stability, and solidarity "used in the ritual construction of small social worlds" (15-16). While the production and exchange of goods in market economies alienate individuals, gift economies are constructed within a matrix of "intimacy" and "community," the "twin systems of social organization" (171-72). To give and receive a gift is to be welcomed into an intimate community, which is necessary to reverse the effects of social alienation wrought by inequitable market economies.

As such, gift exchange as a mode of fostering communal solidarity is perceived as a threat by the white residents of Bayonne who control both its legal and economic institutions. This perceived threat is nowhere more evident than in Sheriff Guidry's attempts to control the circulation of gifts between Jefferson and the black community. When Grant Wiggins arrives at the prison for the first time, the sheriff defines the terms of exchange: "Don't bring anything up there you don't want taken away from you—knife, razor blade, anything made of glass," he explains. Although he doesn't "expect" that Grant would "do anything" like sneaking in weapons, he insists that "you can never be sure" (50). By reminding Grant that anything can be taken away from him, Guidry asserts his authority in both his professional capacity as Sheriff and in his *de facto* authority as a white man.

Nonetheless, Guidry's control gradually gives way to the persistence of Jefferson's visitors as they establish an intimate gift economy within the prison. Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother, is the first to bring gifts to Jefferson: a home-cooked meal and clean clothes, two innocuous gifts that nonetheless undergo careful scrutiny before the sheriff will allow them into Jefferson's cell. During these first few visits, Jefferson is unresponsive and even dismissive of his godmother. His refusal to acknowledge her gifts, let alone eat, results from his preoccupation with his impending execution. "When they go'n do it? Tomorrow?" he wonders (73). He even asks Grant whether he will be the one who will "jeck that switch" to the electric chair (74). Jefferson's inability to accept their gifts signals his personal despair: Jefferson has essentially acquiesced to his fate, and neither food nor clothing nor company brings him comfort from the looming reality of his execution.

So why does Grant succeed in reaching Jefferson when all the others fail? One answer may be that Grant, unlike Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose, is more concerned with Jefferson's life than his death. In other words, while the other visitors offer gifts to prepare

Jefferson for his spiritual salvation, Grant's gifts aim toward reinstating the reciprocal social bonds severed by his imprisonment. At first, the other visitors are skeptical of Grant's intentions: for example, when Grant brings a Philco transistor radio to Jefferson, they accuse him of interfering with Jefferson's salvation.



[Fig. 2: The Radio, author's screenshot of 1999 HBO film version of *A Lesson Before Dying*]

Reverend Ambrose expresses the most vehement opposition to the radio, calling it a “sin box” that takes Jefferson’s focus away from God (181). Grant, however, insists that material comforts are necessary to heal Jefferson’s manhood. As he explains to Tante Lou, “that radio has nothing to do with turning Jefferson against God,” but instead “is there to help him not think about death. He’s locked up in that cage like an animal—and what else can he think about but that last day and the last hour? That radio makes it less painful” (182). What Reverend Ambrose and the others miss, however, is that focusing so much on death is precisely what interferes with Jefferson’s ability to see himself as a member of their community. They obviously see Jefferson as a man worthy of salvation, but they do not know how to shuttle him out of the slaughterhouse. Grant, however, recognizes that “the only thing that keeps him from thinking he is not a hog is that radio” because it both represents and enables his place in the black community (183). Grant’s theory is confirmed when Jefferson discusses his musical preferences with Grant, marking the first sustained conversation that Jefferson has with any of his visitors. Nonetheless, when Reverend Ambrose condemns the radio, Grant retorts: “Take that radio away, and let’s see what you can do for the soul of a hog” (183).

The radio’s importance as a gift, however, extends well beyond its role in breaking through communicative barriers with Jefferson. Its power also derives from the means through which Grant procures it. The radio is effectively a gift from the entire black community in Bayonne, the result of a collective effort to raise money to purchase it. Initially, Grant is not willing to humble himself enough to ask other members of the community for help, so he begins by asking his girlfriend Vivian for a loan. To his surprise, however, he finds that others are eager to contribute

as well. When he tells Claiborne at the Rainbow Club about the radio, the barkeeper gathers “a couple of dollar bills and some change” donated by the bar’s patrons. In addition, Claiborne contributes five dollars of his own money (173). Thelma, who runs the adjoining café, also kicks in ten dollars, giving Grant enough money to buy the radio.

The communal effort to purchase the radio has transformative effects not only for Jefferson but also for Grant. The donors refuse repayment, but they still implicitly expect something from him: a personal commitment to the black community from which he has distanced himself in pursuit of his personal ambitions. Their expectations tell us that these members of the Bayonne community are circulating not only money but also a moral currency. For example, we see from Claiborne’s subtle smile when Grant promises to pay him back over the weekend that he does not expect to see the money again. The smile, however, is also an acknowledgement that Grant is in his debt. Thelma’s response is even more telling. When Grant says he’ll bring the money back tomorrow, she says, “I ain’t in no hurry” (174). “Here,” Thelma says when she gives him a wrinkled ten-dollar bill. In that single word, Grant infers that Thelma means the money as a gift given “with a kind of love,” but also with expectations of reciprocity. Grant interprets Thelma’s “here” as a demand to respond to the pressing questions that define their community: “When will all this end?” he imagines Thelma asking. “When will a man not have to struggle to have money to get what he needs ‘here’? When will a man be able to live without having to kill another man ‘here’?” (174). Each of these questions charges Grant to invest himself in the moral economy of his community.

Grant’s own social reintegration therefore depends on his success in helping Jefferson do the same. In this way, Grant reverses the “objectification process” that “predominates in a commodity economy” by actuating “the personification process” that “predominates in a gift economy,” wherein “things and people” assume the “social forms of persons” (Gregory 39). Furthermore, Grant’s role as the primary vehicle of gift-exchange also reestablishes his own social ties. While Grant expresses his investment in masculine individualism when he says that he wants to “live for myself and for my woman and for nobody else” (191), Jefferson believes that his impending demise is the result of his abandonment. Neither man feels dependent upon or invested in the community in which he was raised. “What people done done to please me?” he asks Grant (222), linking his perceived dehumanization to his sense of social isolation. Ultimately, the communal restoration of both Jefferson and Grant depends on their ability to answer this question and understand that their fates are inextricably intertwined.

At this point it becomes clear that gifts are not only symbols of communal solidarity in the novel but also the means through which its black characters affirm social bonds through the creation of moral debt. Both Jefferson and Grant admit as much in their final meetings. Grant makes clear that he wants Jefferson to reciprocate the gifts given to him by Bayonne’s black community, imploring him especially to “please” his “nannan” by telling her that he is a “man” and that he will “stand” when he walks to the electric chair. Furthermore, he explains that both he and the schoolchildren, who had collected money, pecans, and roasted peanuts as Christmas gifts for Jefferson, “need” and “want” him to “be better” (191-93). Jefferson is quite aware that affirming his manhood in these ways will not change his fate, and that Grant has

placed an inordinate responsibility on him in the days before his execution. He declares: "Y'all asking a lot, Mr. Wiggins, from a poor old nigger who never had nothing" (222).

The most subversive moment in the novel, however, is not Jefferson's acceptance of the gifts but his decision to redistribute them before his execution. First, he attempts to give his radio to the young deputy Paul Bonnin, but Paul rejects it, instead insisting that it be given to the other inmates. The radio, as noted earlier, had connected Jefferson to black culture, allowing him and the other prisoners to listen to blues music. Paul recognizes the importance of this cultural connection to the other men and rejects Jefferson's offer, conceding some of his authority as a white male and public official. Instead, Paul only accepts the marble that Bok Lawrence, one of Grant's schoolchildren, had given to Jefferson just a few days before. Jefferson also asks Paul to return the pearl-handled knife to Henri Pichot, which Henri gave him toward the end of his imprisonment so he could sharpen his pencil and continue writing in his notebook (245). Finally, Jefferson asks Paul to deliver his notebook to Grant, which contains the final evidence that he had died thinking of himself not as a hog, but as a man.

Through this process of re-gifting, Jefferson both opposes and undermines the legal and economic forms of white supremacy that organize the Bayonne community and that led to Jefferson's imprisonment in the first place. In short, these gifts impose a moral debt on their recipients, white and black alike. This is the final step in the process of Jefferson's self-liberation from the realm of a racially oppressive socioeconomic order that figures him as a hog. Jefferson's re-gifting marks his reintegration into the moral economy of his community that had been severed through his legal and economic subjugation. In this way, Jefferson's reciprocal gifting actuates what Bourdieu identifies as the socially utilitarian function of gifts, in which their exchange establishes or reproduces "social relationships that are directly usable." Such uses, Bourdieu continues, transform "contingent relations, such as those of neighborhood, the workplace, or even kinship, into relationships that are at once necessary and elective, implying durable obligations subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship, etc.) or institutionally guaranteed (rights)" ("Forms" 87). Indeed, Jefferson's willingness to receive and give are not only acts of human agency and self-determination but also social transformation. Paul, Henri, Grant, and the schoolchildren are all now indebted to Jefferson, and the novel leaves open the question of how each character will fulfill their own social expectations. In this way, we might consider what the novel demands of readers as well. Like the residents of Bayonne, we, too, are indebted to Jefferson. His gifts provoke our reply.

Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in a Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge UP, 1986.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy, Wiley Blackwell, 2011. pp. 81-93.

---. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge UP, 1977.

Cheal, David. *The Gift Economy*. Routledge, 1988.

Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1855. *Documenting the American South*. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html>.

Gaines, Ernest. *A Lesson Before Dying*. Vintage, 1994.

Greenberg, Kenneth. *Honor and Slavery*. Princeton UP, 1997.

Gregory C.A. *Gifts and Commodities*. 2nd ed., HAU Books, 2015. http://haubooks.org/viewbook/gifts-and-commodities/01_fm01.

Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W.D. Halls, W.W. Norton, 2000.

Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. Updated ed., Oxford UP, 2004.