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## Éditorial

Il y a des avancées qui se font par bonds qualitatifs. Et Germivoire se situe – en tant que Revue – dans cet élan de la qualité qui vise des avancées positives. Mais ses bonds se font de manière trimestrielle. Ainsi il y a la parution de juin et celle de décembre. Et nous voici au numéro de décembre 2021. Un numéro qui annonce la clôture d'un parcours et l'entame d'un autre, à la fois.

Et ce numéro de Germivoire s'inscrit dans la tradition de son parcours. Revue scientifique ouvert sur les champs des humanités et des sciences humaines, elle accueille des contributions d'origines diverses, que celles-ci soient à suc littéraire ou sociétal. Dans cet élan, vous y trouverez, cher lectorat, une variété d'articles au goût des mondes germaniste, angliciste, hispano-ibérique, géo-historique, socio-linguistique ou communicationnel. C'est à une sorte de 'n'zassa' stylistique à la Jean Marie Adiaffi que vous propose ce numéro de Germivoire de décembre 2021. A vous le beau parcours fructueux entre ces proposées lignes aux entrecroisements divers !!

Pour ce qui est du parcours, nous profitons de l'occasion pour dire à nos esprits contributeurs à venir que nous allons, dorénavant, privilégier les langues allemande, anglaise et française comme vecteurs de diffusion, comme nous nous le sommes suggéré lors d'une réunion de rédaction. Ce, en raison du double regard de responsabilité et d'efficacité. Responsabilité vis-à-vis du contenu des articles. Et efficacité quant à la capacité des membres de la rédaction d'avoir un minimum d'appréciation sur le contenu général des contributions avant de les envoyer à l'instruction. Nous espérons une compréhension fructueuse de votre part !

Et que dire d'autre ? Rien de particulier, excepté nos souhaits de bonne lecture et de bonnes fêtes de fin d'année 2021 !

Bien à nous, bien à vous !

Hotep !i! Paix !i!

**Brahima DIABY**

## **Eclipse of the White Myth of Supremacy in Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying***

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### **Abstract**

Ernest Gaines's novel *A Lesson Before Dying* gives a strong expression to the eclipse of white supremacy in the construction of antiblack stereotypes that foreground the relations between Whites and Blacks dotted with violence and injustice. That eclipse of the white myth yields a double effect. First, it parallels the rise of the new Black who successfully dismantles the prevailing white myth ; secondly, it gives rise to hope for a brighter future.

**Keywords:** White Race, Black Race, .Myth, Collapse, Hope.

### **Resumé**

Le roman d'Ernest Gaines *A Lesson Before Dying* donne une expression forte à l'éclipse de la suprématie blanche dans la construction des stéréotypes anti-noirs qui mettent en avant les relations entre Blancs et Noirs parsemées de violence et d'injustice. Cette éclipse du mythe blanc produit un double effet. Premièrement, il est parallèle à la montée du nouveau Noir qui démantèle avec succès le mythe du blanc dominant ; deuxièmement, il fait naître l'espoir d'un avenir meilleur.

**Mots-clés :** Race Blanche, Race Noire, Mythe, Effondrement, Espoir

## INTRODUCTION

The chronicling of interracial relationships in American literature in general and in African-American literature in particular has always constituted an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Ernest Gaines is among the American writers whose works dramatize the racial issue in blatant terms. His novels usually depict the relations between Whites and Blacks and they defy powerful white repressive system that gags Blacks. Providing a political response to the Black's dehumanization, his novels picture black communities with some dignity, as they seek to free themselves from white domination. This essay on the eclipse of the white myth explores that change in the Black's posture toward the White. In this respect, this analysis of Gaines's novel aims to bring out the strategies and the mechanisms used by Blacks to subvert the myth about the White whose domination parallels the creation of ideologies to justify the racial hierarchy.

Myths exist in every society and constitute key elements of human culture. Their main roles are to teach moral lessons and explain historical events. Authors of literary works often take their stories or themes from myths. For example, in his poem "*Paradise Lost*" (1667), John Milton plays out the genesis story about the fall of man and subsequent eviction from the Garden of Eden.

Robert Graves's works indicate that a myth is a traditional story which embodies a belief regarding some facts or phenomena of experience, and in which the forces of nature and the soul are often personified; a sacred narrative regarding a god, a hero, the origin of the world or of a people. He adds that a myth can also mean a common-held but false belief, misconception; a fictitious or imaginary person or thing (*Greek Myths*, 1955).

Gaines's "*A Lesson Before Dying*" lays a particular stress on the second part of the definition of the term "myth" in so far as it exists only in Whites' imagination because its actual existence is not verifiable. The postures of the black characters in the novel consist in challenging, in the Derridean meaning of the term, the binary opposition that privileges the white race. These characters defy the hierarchical system created by the Whites. In other words, the story about Blacks and Whites in the novel gradually reproduces the pattern of deconstruction as labelled by Derrida (*Of Grammatology*, 1967).

Dealing also with deconstruction, Jean Jacques Rousseau indicates that society and culture are described as corrupting and oppressive forces that gradually develop out of an idyllic state of nature in which humans exist in peaceful isolation from one another



(Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 1974). For Rousseau, nature is prior to culture. Yet, there is another sense in which culture is certainly prior to nature. In similar ways Gaines presents the white myth as a strategy for the persistence of hegemony or white supremacy. In its first articulation, this analysis will deal with the myth of the white supremacy. Secondly, the study will highlight the way Blacks challenge and subvert the white myth.

## **1. The Myth of White Supremacy.**

Most of Gaines's literary works bring out the relationships existing between Whites and Blacks in a white dominant society. His analysis shows that Whites dominate Blacks so much so that the latter have the feeling that America is not also their country. One of the key factors by which Whites debase Blacks is the negation of their humanity.

### **1.1. The Negation of Black Humanity.**

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, White people deny the existence of Blacks giving the impression that they are not also human beings. Gaines highlights the inhuman treatments that Blacks undergo on the plantation they live. In the novel, through the main character Jefferson, Gaines shows how Blacks are relegated to the ranks of animals. Jefferson is found in a bar where there has been some shooting. When the shooting comes to an end, three persons are found dead: one white man, (Alcee Gropé) and two black men, (Brother and Bear). Jefferson is the only one who is alive on the scene of crime and is accused of murder and sentenced to death for having killed a white man. In a country where racism is at its height, it is an abomination for a Black to kill a white man. For this reason, Jefferson must also die. Arrested for a crime he has not committed, Jefferson must undergo hatred and racism. During Jefferson's supposedly trial, the lawyer who is supposed to defend him makes the situation worse when he calls Jefferson a hog. For him, "It would be like tying a hog down into that chair and executing him, an animal that didn't know what any of it was all about", (23). Denying Jefferson's human attributes, the attorney shows the extent to which the white power can destroy and even exhaust Blacks' existence. Instead of finding extenuating circumstances to free his client, the attorney seizes the situation to suppress Blacks' humanity. Through Jefferson, the attorney declares undying hatred for the whole black race. Speaking to the Jury, the attorney says: "gentlemen of the jury, this man planned a robbery ? oh pardon me, I surely did not mean to insult your intelligence by saying man, would you please forgive me for committing such an error"(6).

From the above quotation, the attorney encourages the jury to sentence Jefferson to death, because that Jury has no interest to analyze deeply a foul action committed by a person considered as an animal. The attorney is in fact encouraging the Jury to inflict an inhuman treatment on Jefferson. To convince the Jury to accept his racist speech for the defense, the attorney goes far by considering Jefferson as an object, when he says: “what you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold to handle of a plow, a thing to load your babbles of cotton that is what you see here, but you do not see anything capable of planning a robbery or a murder, think on that, gentlemen, think on it” (6). The attorney invites the Jury to see Jefferson as a tool that is used to satisfy a need. For example, an ax is used to cut trees. It cannot act by itself. For that attorney, Blacks are useful only when they follow instructions given by Whites. They have no intelligence to act by themselves.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the myth built by Whites has a real negative impact on Blacks. When Jefferson is sent to prison, he behaves exactly like a hog. When Grant, the most educated black man on the plantation goes to see him in his cell, he brings him biscuits and sweet potatoes, but Jefferson refuses these meals, preferring to eat corn, a food used to feed hogs. Grant reports that: “Jefferson knelt down on the floor and put his head inside the bag and started eating, without using his hands. He even sounded like a hog” (65). From Jefferson’s behavior, we notice that the white myth has succeeded is turning Blacks into animals or things, since they internalize that white ideology by accepting it as part of their attitudes or their way of thinking. It is in that way that Whites want to see Blacks. This is why Guidry, the Sheriff is reluctant to Grant’s visits to Jefferson in prison. For him, Grant will convince Jefferson to stop behaving like a hog and will adopt human attitudes.

According to white ideology, Blacks are inferior beings and should always stay subordinate persons. This is why while visiting Jefferson in prison, the Sheriff gives Grant a severe warning when he says: “If I notice any aggravation, I stop all visits” (106). For the Sheriff, the relations between Whites and Blacks will become worse if Jefferson has a clear conscience of his human condition. Jefferson’s raising of awareness is viewed as a serious threat to the White’s system of domination represented by the Sheriff who is scared of his intention of being equal to Whites. The sheriff considers Grant’s attitude as a scandal and attempts to extinguish it by humiliating him frequently. Grant reports his various cases of humiliation as follows: “The humiliation I had to go through, going into that man’s kitchen. The hours I had to wait while they ate and drank and socialized before they would even see me” (62). The humiliation inflicted on Grant by the Sheriff has a tendency to remember him

that he is a subhuman and as such he deserves neither respect nor consideration. The choice of the kitchen as a place where he has to wait for hours is not fortuitous. The kitchen is the symbol of enslavement, abasement and domination. Despite Grant's high qualification and education, the Sheriff is without respect for him. In his mind, whatever the level of education of Blacks, they remain inferior to Whites and have no social consideration. The humiliation underwent by Grant reaches its height when the Sheriff asks him to respond only by saying "Yes Sir" or "No Sir" during their conversation. Behaving so, the Sheriff turns Grant into "Sambo" (Boskin, 1986). In American history, after the Civil War (1776-1883), the term "Sambo" was used in conversation as a common given name among black people. The term refers to racial stereotypes and is perceived as offensive, insulting and demeaning. The myth of the white supremacy exerted on Blacks is not only seen through the negation their humanity, but also through the judicial system.

## **1.2. The Marginalization of Blacks Through The Judicial System**

Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, describes the judicial system, not as an institution of justice, but as a system reproducing white supremacy that strengthens the myth of white's power of domination. In the novel, Gaines points out that freedom is inaccessible to Blacks. After incidents in a bar that causes the death of a white man, Alcee Gropé, a black man, Jefferson is arrested on the crime scene and without any serious investigation, he is sentenced to death. Composed of twelve white men, the jury gives the verdict: "guilty of robbery and murder in the first degree" (7). The verdict means the execution on the electric chair of the black man. The quickness with which the verdict is given does not guarantee any efficiency of the system, but rather an unjust law that is prestablished to punish Black people whose existence is viewed as a threat to white supremacists. There is any law bound to protect their rights. The only crime committed by Jefferson is to have been at the wrong place at the wrong time. Grant, the most educated black man on the plantation does not attend the trial because he foresees the verdict, hence the significance of his statement about any improbable justice for Blacks: "Just like everyone else in the quarter, I knew what the sentence was going to be" (8). This predictable outcome is what he announces in the narrative denegation in the opening lines of the novel: "I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be. Still I was there" (3).

Grant, like any other Black character knows that they don't have any right to assert since justice is on the side of Whites. Grant's observation shows that the gap between the judicial system (controlled by Whites) and Blacks is very deep. Blacks are so marginalized that they have lost any hope in the judicial system. The despair felt by the black community is expressed by Grant when he tells Miss Emma: "Jefferson is dead. It is only a matter of weeks.... There is nothing I can do anymore, nothing any of us can do anymore" (11). For Grant, Blacks have no control of events taking place in the area. As a consequence, their destiny is found in a mould made and controlled by the White. Their complete helplessness parallels their inability to face the fierceness of the White's hegemonic posture. It is an indisputable sign that they are ignored by Whites. The humiliation felt by Grant when he meets the Sheriff sounds like a shame for the whole black community. Grant explains the circumstances of his humiliation when he arrives at the Sheriff's home: "they continued their conversation for another five or ten minutes as if I weren't there" (104). Grant has no other choice than undergoing the insulting attitude of the Sheriff. The black leader cannot rant and rave about the Sheriff's behaviour because he has no right to do so. The Sheriff is an important personality since he must make sure that law is obeyed in his county. Any person who infringes the law can be arrested for disturbing public order. For this reason, Grant cannot express his discontent.

Grant's experience is similar to Pecola Breedlove's condition in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970). When Pecola enters a store run by Yacobowski, a white man, he does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. From this negation of her person, Pecola gives up any effort in searching for blue eyes. For Grant, after the negation of his presence by the Sheriff, he loses any hope and says: "I need to go some place where I can feel I'm living" (22). For him, due to the various injustices Blacks are victims of, life on the plantation has no more meaning on the plantation they live. Jefferson, who is the most affected by the ravages of the judicial system, also feels discouraged. His discouragement stands in the fact that the Black race is impotent before the prevailing white myth. This is why he refuses to eat because whatever the circumstances, Whites will kill him. When he talks with Miss Emma who offers him various meats in his cell, he feels no interest in any meal. The only question he asks Miss Emma is: "when they go'n do it? Tomorrow?" (57). For him, it is useless to eat since he will be executed shortly. Analyzing his frame of mind, Grant says: "He looked at me in great pain" (161). Jefferson is desperate at that precise moment, because he now understands that he is victim of injustices. But the pain that he feels constitutes a source of

motivation, and his mental strength enables him to rebel against the white myth that has gagged Blacks for centuries. His pain is also felt by the whole black community that refuses to resign itself to the white supremacy. Blacks understand that for a better existence, they have to go against the myth of the white supremacy

## **2. The Disruption of the White Myth of Superiority.**

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the white society exerts all sorts of pressures on the black community in order to oppress and dominate Blacks. To overcome the obstacles set by the white administration, that oppressed community gets organized to resist to their oppressors. The solidarity exhibited by Blacks permit them to disrupt the myth of the white supremacy and assert themselves not only as human beings, but also American citizens.

### **2.1. Solidarity as a Strategy of Disruption.**

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, facing with the various injustices Blacks are victim of, they have no other choice than getting united to be stronger. In the novel, soon after Jefferson is arrested, the black community of Bayonne get organized to give him assistance. Their first action consists in visiting Jefferson in prison to express their compassion. To reach this first goal, they must have the consent of Guidry, the local Sheriff in charge of the prison where Jefferson is sent. To meet the Sheriff, they want Henri Pichot to intercede on their behalf. Henri Pichot is the owner of the plantation on which they live. Miss Emma and Tante Lou who are the initiators of this step were both employed by Henri Pichot's family as cooks in their youth. Henri is married to the Sheriff's sister and they want him to use his influence on the Sheriff to allow Grant to visit Jefferson in prison. This surge of solidarity is necessary for Blacks to assert their presence in a racist environment that tries to reduce them to silence. Asking a favor to Whites is not perceived as a sign of weakness, but rather as an expression of love for one member of their community who is in danger of death. In the course of conversation with Henri Picot, Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother says: "I'll be up here again tomorrow, Mr. Henri. I'll be on my knees next time you see me" (17). The black community's sense of solidarity in *A Lesson Before Dying* is similar to that of the black community in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). In that novel, when Sofia is sent to prison for having beaten the Mayor and his wife, the black community rises up to assist her. They send Squeak, a member of the black community to talk with the warden in order to release Sofia from prison. Unfortunately, she is beaten by the warden beyond recognition.

The expression of love indicated for Jefferson and Sofia in the two novels by the black community is so deep that some members are ready to accept humiliation from Whites. The sentiments of Miss Emma and the beating of Squeak show that a sacrifice is never too much to save a person threatened with death. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Seeing the mobilization and unity of the black community, Mr. Henri Pichot convinces the Sheriff to authorize them to visit Jefferson. The solidarity displayed by the black community has forced the Sheriff to accept their request. This goal which has been reached is greatly significant for Blacks in the environment of the novel, because Mr. Guidry is perceived as a racist Sheriff who implements actions to reduce Blacks to nothingness. For them, this success is a sign that the white myth is no longer a threat. After visiting Jefferson in prison, his godmother complains about his living conditions and asks the Sheriff to give Jefferson a more comfortable room. Once more, that request has been granted. While communicating with Jefferson whether he would like to meet his visitors in the dayroom instead of his cell, the Sheriff told him that it is entirely up to him and his wishes would be carried out.

Generally speaking, in prison life, prisoners have no rights to demand. But in the case of Jefferson, the Sheriff gives him the possibility to make a wish. The Sheriff who is usually known as a pitiless man, becomes suddenly kind and lenient. The change noticed in the Sheriff's behaviour is due to the interest that the whole black community takes in Jefferson.

The recoil of the Sheriff from the black community is a victory for that community. Facing the solidarity and the unity of the black community, the white administration in the novel environment has no strength left. Even if Jefferson is still in prison, but the fact of respecting his rights as a prisoner by the Sheriff is enough for the black community to have faith in the fight they have undertaken. For them, this fight will lead to the advent of a society in which both Whites and Blacks will have equal rights. This is why the solidarity is of paramount importance for Blacks. Knowing that a fragmented black society will never succeed in any fight facing the hegemony of the white administration, union proves to be necessary. Isolated and disunited, Blacks will fall prey to the white power that is why they advocate union within their community. That union is based on love that Grant explains to Jefferson to make him feel stronger when he says: “ I don't know when I'm going to die. That's why I try to live as well as I can every day and not to hurt people. Especially people who love me” (101). Grant invites Jefferson to know that the members of his community attach a great value to him so much so that he should conform to their wish not to disappoint them. The wish expressed by the black community is to convince Jefferson to accept himself

as a human being, and not as a hog as advocated by Whites. Solidarity asserted by Blacks that leads to the weakening of the white power is a sign of hope. They have high hopes that the future will be bright.

## **2.2-Hope for a Bright Future as a Mechanism of Reversal.**

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Black people maintain hope for bright prospects. Two characters in the novel embody the new vision of the black community: Grant and Jefferson. In that novel, Gaines lays a particular stress on the fact that it is during hard times that black leaders show the possibility for redress. Leadership appears as an imperative because Black people know that they must not rely on leadership that the white power appoints for them. They need their own leaders. Whether Whites like it or not, they have to live side by side with leaders Black people appoint themselves. It is in this context that Grant has been chosen by his godmother, Miss Emma to be their leader. She introduces him to Mr. Henri Pichot, the owner of the plantation they live on as follows: “ I’m old Mr. Henri, I want somebody else to take my place” (15). Miss Emma provides a way whereby Grant is identified to continue the fight Blacks undertook centuries ago. For Miss Emma, Blacks on the plantation must have an opportunity to act and do things by themselves. Grant explains why he has been chosen to lead the black community saying: “they look at their fathers, their grandfathers, their uncles, their brothers all broken. They see me and I, who grew up on that same plantation, can teach reading, writing and arithmetic” (137).

Grant who is highly qualified has high standard of learning and he is held in great respect. As such, he is skillful enough to be the spokesperson of the black community, because Blacks must respond in their own way, on their own term and in a manner that fits their temperaments. To reach this goal, Grant is given a precise goal, which seems to be his map road as a leader. He has to convince Jefferson who is in jail that he is not a hog as claimed by Whites, but a human being. He clarifies his map road in these terms: “They want me to make him a man before he dies” (23). Before visiting Jefferson in jail, Grant must have the consent of the Sheriff in charge of the prison. Meeting the Sheriff to have his authorization to visit Jefferson, Grant talks with him as equals. Grant shows the Sheriff that as a black man, he is smart and skillful. Noticing his smartness, the Sheriff says: “ Maybe you’re just a little too smart for your own good” (38).

Grant's discretion shows that black leaders are sometimes distinguished by their smartness. They are educated enough to communicate not only with Whites, but also with their own people. In this perspective, they allow their people to be successful in their fight to deconstruct the white power. It is in this sense that they can be regarded as heroes in so far as they teach their people how to behave in the face of numerous obstacles set by the white power. In front of his students, Grant explains the mission he is vested with: to make Jefferson a man. He continues saying: "exactly what I'm trying to do here with you now: to make you responsible young men and young ladies" (31). From the quotation above, Grant appears as a standard bearer who transmits the others the necessary responsibility to go against the white power that discredits them. In doing so, Grant plays the same role as Ned Douglass in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (Gaines, 1971). In that novel, like Grant, Ned goes to school and becomes quickly learned. He leaves for Kansas and comes back to Louisiana as a teacher. Then, he decides to teach the others because he wants them to rise for a brighter future.

Having had the authorization from the Sheriff to meet Jefferson, Grant explains him the importance to be a hero within the black community. He insists to say that: "A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men can't do" (158). Grant is convincing Jefferson to be a man out of the ordinary, with exceptional qualities and above other men. Grant wants him to understand that he can be a hero, that is to say a valuable person on whom the whole community relies for its progress and for better living conditions. For that, according to Grant, he must reject the untrue spoken statements about him since they are intended to damage his reputation as a human being. Grant encourages Jefferson to prove the contrary when he tells him: "I want you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be" (159). For Grant, as a hero, Jefferson must declare his opposition to the white power not only to force Whites to grant equal rights to Blacks, but also to enable them to have a better future. It is at this condition that Jefferson will destroy the white myth. Grant explains him the meaning of a myth when he says: "A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they are better than anyone else on earth, and that's a myth" (159). Grant wants Jefferson to bear in mind that Whites are wrong when they consider themselves more valuable and intelligent than Blacks. From Grant's reasoning, Jefferson understands that the last worry of Whites is to imagine a black man to stand, think and show common humanity. From this conviction, Jefferson is determined to show Whites that he is as much a man than they can never be by



confronting death with dauntlessness. Grant has reached his goal by bringing Jefferson to overcome the fear of death and by accepting himself as a valuable human being.

Jefferson eventually becomes aware of his human conditions and gets rid of fake images ascribed to him by Whites. He no longer desires to eat corn, food for hog, but he now eats pecans, peanuts, ice cream and rice. In addition, he no more makes sound like a hog, but talks and talks with his visitors. Grant feels happy to notice the qualitative changes that occur in Jefferson's life and reports that: "Jefferson and I were communicating, and he and his nannan were also talking. The way Jefferson raised the spoonful of gumbo and rice to his mouth with both hands, and dipped the spoon again, and raised it to his mouth, because I had asked him to do it" (162).

Grant is delighted that Jefferson's actions are good because they are based on reasons, foiling the oppressive system of the white power that denies Blacks' human nature. Jefferson continues to assert his human nature when he uses a note pad and pencil to Write:

I dreamt it again last night. They was taking me somewhere. I was not crying. I wasn't begging. If I ain't nothing but a hog how come they just don't knock me in the head like a hog ? Starb me like a hog ? Man walk on two foots: hogs on four foots (P184-185).

Stating the difference between a hog and a human being, Jefferson shows the wrongness of the white myth that has long treated Blacks as animals. Jefferson writes these words with the conviction that if he has to die, he will die as a human being. He leaves these words for future generations before his death to encourage them to defy the fear of death. In writing so, he participates in the realization of his history refusing posthumous ceremonies. With his courage and bravery, Jefferson symbolizes the hope of the black race which believes in the advent of a brighter future.

### **CONCLUSION.**

Through his novel *A Lesson Before Dying*, Ernest Gaines highlights the stormy relations between Blacks and Whites. Living in a racist environment, Black people are mistreated, marginalized and are often relegated to the rank of animals. Dominated by the myth of the white power, Black people have sometimes the feeling that they are inferior to Whites. They internalize stereotyped images ascribed to them by Whites and ultimately consider themselves as useless and impotent. Yet, some Black characters in the novel refuse to submit themselves to the hegemony of the white power. They go against the white myth to show its wrongness.

Those who declare their opposition to the white power are usually killed, but they die with dignity and honors as valuable human beings.

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