

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Lesson Before Dying

by
Ernest J. Gaines

Book Information

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*
Quiz Number: 10287
Random House, 1994
ISBN 0-679-74166-6; LCCN
256 Pages
Book Level: 4.4
Interest Level: UG

Two black men--one a teacher, the other a death-row inmate--struggle to live and die with dignity.

Award: Misc./Other

Topics: Careers, Teacher; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 9, 90%; Family Life, Death; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; People, African American; Places, Prisons; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club; U.S. States/Regions, Louisiana

Main Characters

Grant the teacher at a plantation school, who visits Jefferson in jail

Henri Pichot the owner of the plantation on which Grant teaches

Jefferson a young black man condemned to death for his relatively minor role in a crime

Miss Emma Jefferson's godmother

Paul the deputy at the jail

Reverend Ambrose the plantation minister

Sam Guidry the sheriff

Tante Lou Grant's aunt

Vivian Grant's girlfriend

Vocabulary

mulatto the child of a white person and a black person

obligation a duty one must do

pastoral relating to a peaceful rural scene

Synopsis

A Lesson before Dying takes place in the 1940s in a small community in the South. A young black man, Jefferson, has been sentenced to die for his role in a robbery that ended with the death of a white shopkeeper. Grant Wiggins, the schoolteacher on the plantation where Jefferson lives, is forced by Jefferson's godmother and Wiggins's aunt to visit Jefferson in prison. Jefferson's godmother's greatest wish is that Jefferson die as a man, rather than the hog the public defender portrayed him as being.

At first, Jefferson barely acknowledges Grant's presence. During an early visit, Jefferson calls himself a hog and eats like a pig the food his godmother has sent. But as time passes, Jefferson becomes receptive to Grant and consents to things Grant asks him to do to please his godmother, such as eating her food.

Grant gives Jefferson a radio, and Jefferson listens to it constantly. The plantation's minister, Reverend Ambrose, is angry with Grant for giving Jefferson a "sin box." Instead, he wants him to help save Jefferson's soul. Although he says he believes in God, Grant no longer follows a religion and cannot in good conscience tell Jefferson he believes in heaven. Nevertheless, he tries to convince Jefferson to be open to the reverend's message. When Jefferson tells Grant about the meanness of his early life, but that he will do his best to be a man for his godmother, Grant says Jefferson is more a man than he is.

Grant gives Jefferson a notebook and a pencil and suggests he write about anything that comes to mind. Jefferson expresses more and more thoughts and feelings about his past life and coming death. He writes about how touched he is when Grant brings the schoolchildren and others from the plantation to visit him.

When the day of the execution arrives, Grant cannot bring himself to attend. He realizes the reverend, who does attend, is a stronger man than he is. The entire plantation community takes the day off work

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to show respect; Grant instructs his students to kneel by their desks during the execution. Afterwards, the white deputy, with whom Grant has been developing rapport, brings Jefferson's notebook to Grant and says Jefferson proved he was a man. Crying, Grant returns to his classroom and faces the students.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Grant talks several times about wanting to leave the plantation and, in fact, had left the plantation in the past. Why did Grant want to leave? Why did he return? Is he likely to leave again in the future?

Grant wanted to leave because the past on the plantation was so painful and the future so bleak. He returned because his people and his past were on the plantation. The unselfish part of him wanted to help them by educating them.

Literary Analysis

There are several different conflicts in *A Lesson before Dying*. What are they? Which do you think are the most important to the story?

A list of the conflicts could include Grant vs. himself, Jefferson vs. himself, blacks vs. whites, Grant vs. society, Grant vs. Jefferson, Grant vs. Reverend Ambrose. The internal conflict within Grant, brought about by his conflict with society, is probably the most important to the story.

Inferential Comprehension

In one of their conversations, Reverend Ambrose tells Grant that, although Grant learned reading, writing, and arithmetic, he "don't know nothing." Why did he say this? Do you agree with Reverend Ambrose? Did Grant agree at the end of the story?

Grant refuses to try to bring religion to Jefferson because he himself does not practice a religion. Reverend Ambrose believes that Grant is ignorant of the needs of the soul, his own and his people's. Reverend Ambrose tells Grant that he does not understand what his own people have gone through to help him become educated.

Constructing Meaning

What is the main lesson or lessons the author is attempting to convey in *A Lesson before Dying*? How do the two main characters, Jefferson and Grant, illustrate these lessons?

If one can rise above the injustices one has experienced in life, one can live and die with dignity and pride. To be able to do this, one must have beliefs. Jefferson was able to rise above his circumstances, whereas Grant was not.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting *A Lesson before Dying* takes place on a Southern plantation and community in the 1940s. It is a highly segregated society. Instruct the students to make a list of the many ways whites and blacks were segregated in this community. Discuss the reasons for segregation and how it affected the people involved. Then, ask the students to research the history of the Civil Rights Movement and report back to the class what they learn about the people and events that were important in helping to end segregation. Finally, ask them if they are aware of any segregation that still occurs today.

Understanding Literary Features One of the themes of this story is that a person can be a better person than his or her past circumstances would seem to permit, providing he or she has beliefs. Hence, Jefferson dies like a man for his

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godmother's sake, despite a life of being treated as less than one. Grant, on the other hand, cannot believe in laws or a God that allowed Jefferson's execution to occur. He concludes that Jefferson is a better man than he is. Toward the end of the story, he says both that he is a slave and that he is not a teacher. Ask the students to write an essay about whether they agree with Grant's opinions about himself and Jefferson. Ask them to write about the role beliefs play in a person's life.

Understanding the Author's Craft Most of *A Lesson before Dying* is written from Grant's point of view, with the exception of Jefferson's diary entries. How would the story be different if it were told from another point of view, specifically, from a white person's point of view? Ask the students to write a journal entry for the day of Jefferson's execution from the point of view of Henri Pichot or Paul.

Responding to Literature Jefferson is executed at the end of the story for a crime in which he played a relatively minor role. Instruct the students to research capital punishment, finding out which states use it, how it is done, what crimes it is used to punish, the racial breakdown of those receiving capital punishment, the cost of capital punishment versus life imprisonment, and whether innocent people are ever executed. After the students present their findings, divide the class into groups to debate the pros and cons of capital punishment.