

## A LESSON BEFORE DYING

# LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

ERNEST J. GAINES

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

GUIDE WRITTEN BY MARY ELLEN SNODGRASS

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### SYNOPSIS

**Chap. 1:** Grant Wiggins, a Louisiana public school teacher in his late twenties, does not attend the trial of Jefferson, but his godmother, Emma Glenn, hears the defense attorney compare the boy to a hog for killing Gropé, a white man, in a liquor store robbery. Because the boy is young and ignorant, the defense asks for mercy. On Friday, the judge determines that Jefferson is guilty of robbery and murder in the first degree. The next Monday, the judge sentences him to death. Reverend Mose Ambrose sits with Emma and Grant's aunt, Tante Lou, when judgement is passed.

**Chap. 2:** After school that afternoon, Emma and Lou sit waiting for Grant. Emma wants Jefferson to be educated like a man before he dies. Lou assures Emma that Grant will take the job and intends to visit white landowner Henri Pichot, the sheriff's brother-in-law, to arrange permission to visit Jefferson's cell. Grant is filled with hate for his homeland and teaching job.

**Chap. 3:** At Pinchot's house, Emma, Lou, and Grant sit in the kitchen with the maid, Inez Lane, to await an audience with the white landowner, who talks with Louis Rougon in the library. Emma had been the cook for the family; Lou had been their laundress. Ten years earlier, Grant had gone to the university and has been teaching locally for the past six years.

Lou comforts Emma as she asks Henri to get permission from the sheriff, Sam Guidry. Henri disapproves of the idea of educating Jefferson and reminds Emma that, against his better judgment, he had been a character witness for Jefferson. Henri refuses to name a time when he will ask Sam. Emma intends to return on Tuesday on her knees.

**Chap. 4:** Grant returns the women to the black quarter and drives up the St. Charles River ten miles to Bayonne, the parish seat of St. Raphael. The area is segregated. He goes to the Rainbow Club, orders shrimp, and telephones fellow teacher Vivian Baptiste to meet him. He presses her to go away with him. She reminds him of their commitment to schoolchildren. The two have dated for three years, but Vivian is still married to an estranged husband. Vivian urges Grant to take the job of educating Jefferson. They make a date to go to Baton Rouge on Friday to share time alone at the home of friends.

**Chap. 5:** At school on Tuesday, Grant ponders the hopelessness of educating children reared under plantation racism. The pupils range from primer level to sixth grade and attend school from late October to the middle of April. In anger at Lou's coercive silence, he lashes a child with a ruler for tabulating on his fingers and forces a girl to write six simple sentences in straight lines. As student teacher Irene Cole watches, Grant strikes a first grader on the head for playing with a bug. He asks students if they understand what is going to happen to Jefferson. At 2:00 P. M., Farrell Jarreau, Henri's yard-

man, asks Grant to come to the Pichot home at 5:00.

**Chap. 6:** Grant awaits Henri in the kitchen. Inez tells him that Henri and Louis bet that Grant can't educate Jefferson before the execution. At 5:30, Sam arrives with Edna, his wife. At 6:00, Edna speaks comfortingly to Grant, who stands in humiliation while Henri deliberately keeps him waiting. At 7:15, Sam, Henri, Louis, and a fat man hear Grant's request that Jefferson die with dignity. Sam agrees to the sessions at the jail, but promises to halt them at "the first sign of aggravation." He orders Grant to report in a couple of weeks to Chief Deputy Clark.

**Chap. 7:** As Grant waits for the first session, he prepares his students for a visit from the superintendent of schools. On Thursday before 2:00, Dr. Joseph drives to the schoolyard. He calls on Gloria Hebert, then on Louis Washington, the worst child in the school, who can recite only a few words from the pledge to the flag. For a half hour, Joseph examines teeth and lectures on nutrition and hard work. Grant asks for more books and supplies and complains about getting hand-me-downs from white schools. Dr. Joseph asks for more emphasis on the pledge to the flag and hygiene.

**Chap. 8:** The next week, winter firewood arrives at 11:00 A. M. At 12:30, Grant dispatches the boys to chop it into stove lengths. He thinks about the men who went to school with him and about his teacher, Matthew Antoine, whom he visited at Poulaya. Antoine warns him that teaching ignorant people is hopeless. In winter 1942, a month or two before Antoine's death, Grant is a beginning teacher.

**Chap. 9:** At 1:30, Grant takes Emma and Lou to the courthouse in Bayonne to visit Jefferson. Paul, a young deputy, checks the basket of food and clothing and frisks Grant. Upstairs, they enter Jefferson's solitary cell and find him lying on the bunk with his face to the wall. He asks when he will be executed. Emma asks Paul to distribute the food to "the rest of them children."

**Chap. 10:** The next two visits are fruitless. Grant gives pocket change to the other inmates. Emma leaves crying. On Friday, the fourth visit, Grant finds Emma coughing and sickly. Lou forces him to go alone. He accuses her of breaking him by humiliation. Emma regrets that there is no one else to send.

**Chap. 11:** On Friday, Guidry warns Grant that the visits must be peaceful. Grant finds Jefferson truculent and dirty. Grant, while eating chicken, declares that Jefferson is a human being. Jefferson kneels by the food bag and gobbles like a pig. Grant accuses him of letting the white man win.

**Chap. 12:** While thinking up a lie to tell Emma, Grant withdraws to the Rainbow Club and hears blacks exulting over Jackie Robinson's success. He recalls at age seventeen hearing Joe Louis fight Schmeling. At the university, Grant learns from Mr. Anderson about Parnell, an Irish freedom fighter. Anderson gets Grant a copy of Joyce's story "Ivy Day in the Committee Room." Grant begins learning about heroes.

Grant drives to Vivian's school, where she teaches sixth

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and seventh grades. While she speaks to the principal, Grant writes "I love you" in French on the blackboard. He urges her to go somewhere to spend the night. She fears that her ex-husband will take her children. Grant tells her about Jefferson's bizarre behavior. She declares that he loves local people more than he hates the place.

**Chap. 13:** On Sunday, Eloise Bouie and Lou depart for church. Grant no longer believes in God. Lou sings her "Termination Song." He thinks of Friday afternoon, when Ambrose, Emma, and Lou awaited his return from jail. Ambrose is concerned for Jefferson's soul, but Grant does not speak of God. Ambrose intends on going to the cell Monday with Emma and Lou. Grant looks up and finds Vivian at the door.

**Chap. 14:** Vivian thinks the house rustic and pastoral. She infers that Grant believes in God. The two walk to the plantation cemetery and into a cane field. They search for pecans, then make love. Vivian thinks they have conceived a child.

**Chap. 15:** Vivian is starting rehearsals for a Christmas program to be given a month later. She stays at the house until Lou returns. Vivian's marriage to a student from Xavier College ended family relations with her kin in Free LaCove. Grant introduces Vivian as the woman he will marry. She answers personal questions about family and about her membership in the Catholic church. Lou calls Vivian a "lady of quality."

**Chap. 16:** On Monday, Ambrose drives Emma and Lou from the jail. Grant anticipates a Christmas program and tree. He urges the class to remember Jefferson. On return home, Grant finds that the visit did not go well. Emma hit Jefferson for refusing to speak and for asking for roasting ears. Lou insists that Grant do something to change Jefferson.

**Chap 17:** On Friday, Grant asks Paul about Jefferson and his jail schedule. Henry Martin, another inmate, ridicules the gifts of food. Grant asks Jefferson to show more concern for Emma. Jefferson, out of anger, insults Vivian. Sam complains that Emma has asked to see Jefferson in the dayroom and is playing on Edna's sympathy to get to Sam. He believes Grant has failed to educate Jefferson, but allows meetings in the dayroom with the prisoner in shackles.

**Chap. 18:** Emma sets places for four on the first dayroom visit. Jefferson refuses to eat. A few days later, a few weeks before Christmas, Paul escorts him to the dayroom to see Grant. Jefferson wants to talk about execution. Grant declares that he owes something to Emma. At the Rainbow Club, Grant chooses not to go to Baton Rouge.

**Chap. 19:** Rain and cold set in two days before the Christmas program. Grant dedicates the program to Jefferson. At 7:00 P. M., people come to the church to watch the re-enactment of Christ's birth, followed by carols and food. Under the tree, the children place a wrapped gift of sweater and socks for Jefferson. Irene thinks Grant looks unhappy.

**Chap. 20:** Late in February an hour before the end of school, Farrell summons Grant to Henri's house. Farrell explains that the execution date is set. Grant leaves Irene in charge and goes to Henri's house. Inez escorts Grant to the front of the house, where Sam and Henri wait. Sam announces the execution date as April 8, the second Friday after Easter, between noon and three. He will send Dr. Gillory to attend Emma. Grant compares the timing to Christ's crucifixion. Ambrose declares that Grant would have more strength to face adversity if he believed in God. Grant walks by the river.

**Chap. 21:** At Emma's house, Grant finds her lying under a quilt. On return home, he greets Vivian at the door. They walk to Emma's house. Vivian whispers encouragement to her.

Emma trusts that Ambrose and Grant can salvage Jefferson. Around 7:45, Grant wants a drink. He meets Vivian at the Rainbow Club. Vivian thinks Irene loves Grant. Grant talks about black women's hope for a black male savior. He explains how Lou reared his mother, whose mother deserted the family.

**Chap. 22:** At the jail the next Friday, Paul notes that Grant is the first visitor since the setting of the date. Jefferson looks out the window at the sky. He wants a gallon of ice cream for his last supper. They discuss Stella's baby. Grant decides to bring Jefferson a radio the next day. At the bar, Claiborne donates five dollars; his wife Thelma makes up the rest. At Morgan's department store, Grant demands a radio still in the box. The clerk deliberately keeps him waiting. Sam is angry that Grant asked permission from Paul rather than from the sheriff himself.

**Chap. 23:** On Monday, Emma, Lou, and Ambrose visit Jefferson, who doesn't want to leave the radio to come to the dayroom for a meal with visitors. The trio carries the food to Jefferson, who lies on his side facing the wall. Sam complains that they had minded before having to stand in the cell to eat and visit. He threatens to confiscate the radio. Lou and Ambrose accuse Grant of bringing a "sin box." Grant reminds them that Jefferson is able to talk without hate. Lou insists they worry more about his soul.

On Wednesday Grant accepts pecans and roasted peanuts from the children. Grant adds apples, candy, and comic books. Jefferson enjoys listening to Randy's Record Shop. Grant asks Jefferson to meet Emma in the dayroom. He urges Jefferson to consider him a friend and to write his thoughts in a notebook. Jefferson thanks the children for the pecans. Grant rejoices at the change in Jefferson.

**Chap. 24:** Emma urges Grant to go to the jail with Lou and Ambrose. Another deputy brings Jefferson to the dayroom. Over rice and gumbo, Ambrose prays too long. Grant asks if Jefferson has questions to ask. The two walk around the room. Grant urges him to eat some gumbo for Emma's sake. He tells Jefferson that a hero does something for other people and reminds him that white people say Jefferson can't be taught. Grant tells him that a myth is an old lie, like the white belief in their supremacy. He admits that he needs Jefferson to validate his professional life. They return to the table.

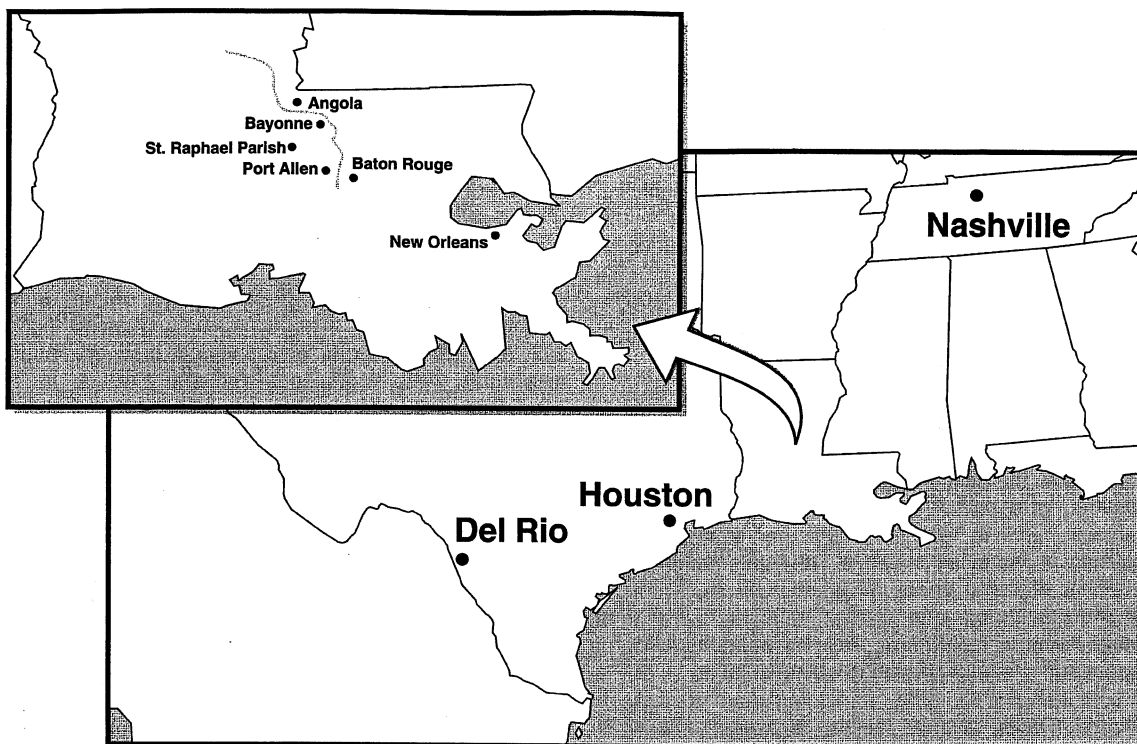
**Chap. 25:** That evening, Grant goes to the Rainbow Club to tell her that Jefferson ate with his own hands. Mulatto bricklayers declare that they think Jefferson should have died months ago. Grant starts a fight. Claiborne ends it by knocking Grant out and forcing him to leave with Vivian.

**Chap. 26:** Vivian tells Grant that Claiborne knocked him out. She urges Grant to stay the night. The ex-husband won't give her a divorce unless he gets the children every weekend. Grant needs Vivian more than ever. They argue. He stomps out, then returns and buries his face in her lap.

**Chap. 27:** After church on Sunday, Ambrose worries that there are only three weeks left to save Jefferson. He accuses Grant of being too selfish to help. Grant believes that evangelism is not his job. Ambrose thinks Grant is uneducated. He worries that Emma will die soon. Grant refuses to make Jefferson kneel to his godmother.

**Chap. 28:** The Thursday before Good Friday, Grant returns to the jail and discovers that Jefferson has written in his notebook about a dream. Grant asks him to believe in God so he can do the same. Jefferson believes his family asks a lot of him. He went to the fields when he was six to carry water to

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laborers. Now he has only two weeks to live.

**Chap. 29:** The diary is Jefferson's first letter. He dreams of walking. Emma brought him Easter eggs. On Monday, he knows that Emma was not well. Henri leaves a little knife for him to sharpen his pencil. The class comes to visit along with people from the quarter. The children kiss Jefferson. Bok, a retarded man, gives him a marble. His cousin Estelle kisses him, making him weep. He apologizes for insulting Vivian and thanks Grant for giving him self-esteem. Jefferson gets a shower and clean clothes. He regretted being with Brother and Bear. He listens to Randy on the radio. The sun comes up in a blue sky.

**Chap. 30:** The truck bearing the electric chair enters town. Lou spends the night with Emma. Ambrose remains until midnight. Vivian planned to have her students on their knees before the execution. Grant drives to Port Allen at 10:30 P. M. and returns home at midnight. Ambrose selects Psalm 23 to read to Jefferson. Harry Williams, another witness, plans to meet LaCox, the mortician.

The execution is Sam's first. He has set it for the storeroom in the courthouse basement, with wires running to the generator on the truck. "Gruesome Gerty," the electric chair, requires a test. Henry Vincent, the executioner, wants Jefferson shaved on head, leg, and wrist, where the electrodes attach. Paul promises Jefferson to attend.

**Chap. 31:** Grant's children return from lunch at noon to kneel until the execution is completed. The plantation is quiet. Grant believes that Christ must be with Jefferson, for there is no one else to turn to at the hour of death. Paul stops at the schoolyard and brings Grant the notebook. Paul is proud of Jefferson's courage and believes Grant is a great teacher. Grant denies credit for the transformation. Grant weeps.

### TIME LINE

**1879** Charles Parnell collected money to finance an Irish boy-

cott of English landlords.

**1921** Grant Wiggins is born and passes to the care of his great-aunt Lou.

**1927** Jefferson is born.

**1933** He goes to work in the fields at age six.

**1938** Grant hears the fight in which Joe Louis defeats Max Schmeling. He goes to the university.

**1942 winter** He returns to the quarter outside Bayonne to teach and visits Matthew Antoine.

**1945** Grant begins dating Vivian Baptiste.

**1947** Jackie Robinson joins the Brooklyn Dodgers and is named player of the year.

**1948** At Alcee Gropé's liquor store, Bear and Brother demand credit. When Bear advances on Gropé, he shoots the two. Jefferson drinks a bottle of liquor and steals from the cash drawer.

**October** Jefferson is found guilty of murder and sentenced to death.

**before 4:00 p.m.** Emma and Lou sit waiting for Grant. Emma wants Jefferson to be educated like a man before he dies. Lou assures Emma that Grant will take the job.

**4:00 p.m.** At Pinchot's house, Emma asks Henri to get permission from the sheriff for visits to Jefferson's cell.

**Tuesday** Sam agrees.

**next week** Winter firewood arrives.

**12:30 P.M.** Grant takes Emma and Lou to the courthouse in Bayonne to visit Jefferson, who refuses to talk.

**November** Lou forces Grant to go alone. He finds Jefferson truculent and dirty.

**Friday** Grant asks Jefferson to show more concern for Emma. Sam believes Grant has failed to educate Jefferson, but allows meetings in the dayroom in shackles.

**next visit** Jefferson refuses to eat.

**December** Paul escorts Jefferson to the dayroom to

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see Grant, who declares that Jefferson owes something to Emma.

**1949 late February** The execution date is set for April 8.

**March 9** Grant visits Jefferson.

**March 14** Grant asks Jefferson to meet Emma in the dayroom and to write his thoughts in a notebook.

**March 18** Ambrose accuses Grant of being too selfish to help save Jefferson's soul.

**March 24** Grant returns to the jail and reads the notebook.

**April 8** Paul is proud of Jefferson's courage and believes Grant is a great teacher. Grant denies credit for the transformation and weeps.

### GAINES'S LIFE

An accomplished artisan, Ernest James Gaines can look back with a chuckle at his part-time job at an insurance agency when he slipped into the bathroom to compose on paper towels. A handsome, introspective loner of Anglo-African-Native American lineage, Gaines, who no longer has to sneak to write, has earned a respected niche in American literature, particularly for his efforts to break black stereotypes. Eldest son of Adrienne J. Colar and Manuel Gaines, a black Louisiana sharecropper coexisting with snobbish Cajuns, Gaines, descendent of sugar plantation workers dating to the 1830s, was born January 15, 1933, on River Lake Plantation near New Roads, Pointe Coupée Parish. He lived in Cherie Quarters, a block of laborers' shacks built by slaves, and worked in the fields from age eight. He, his sister, and brothers were raised by their disabled great aunt, Augusteen Jefferson, who inspired him by crawling to keep house and tend a garden and by encouraging visitors to tell folk stories and ghost tales. He entered a black school in a nearby church in New Roads, the town he calls Bayonne in his novels. After developing a neat round hand, he served as local scribe and wrote letters for illiterate neighbors.

Gaines's parents separated in 1941. He moved to California at the age of 15 to live with his mother, stepfather, Raphael Norbert Colar, a sailor in the merchant marine, and seven step-siblings. At his stepfather's direction, he left street loafing and discovered libraries that were open to all races. Looking for works representative of the South he called home, he read widely, located no recognizable settings like his home, and determined to write from experience. At age 16, he completed his first novel on a rented typewriter. The work, influenced chiefly by European authors who wrote of peasant life, came back swiftly from its first reading by a New York publisher; Gaines burned the package. He was educated at Vallejo Junior College and, while he was serving in the army from 1953 to 1955, won some short story contests. On the GI Bill, he studied creative writing at San Francisco State College and Stanford University.

After reading Gaines's "The Turtles," Dorothea Oppenheimer, a literary agent, encouraged him to write professionally. He took a series of odd jobs—dishwashing, printers' helper, postal delivery, and mail room clerk. His lifestyle was humble to the point of penury until he published his third novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, which is influenced by William Faulkner's Southern regionalism—and told through the unmistakable voice of a believable fictional character. Shortly before taking a teaching post at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette, Gaines was strapped financially and facing knee surgery.

With the encouragement of the university, Gaines moved into a campus residence, where he continues to teach, works daily at the trade of fiction, and has served as writer in residence at Denison and Stanford universities. In addition to a full schedule of writing, lecturing, and teaching, he regularly renews his ties with the rural south by visiting his Louisiana roots. He married for the first time at age sixty to Dianne Gaines, a Miami assistant district attorney.

Gaines's strength lies in his ease with Southern rural folk and their complex interaction. Time credits Gaines' patience in dealing with potentially explosive issues, notably racism and social change. Other critics compliment Gaines's dignity, control, and narrative gift. He acknowledges the influence of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway as well as Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant. Also, from a study of Gogol, Turgenev, and Chekhov, Gaines has evolved a style of looking at grassroots origins and their influence on tradition. As he describes the drive to create, "If the book you want doesn't exist, you try to make it exist."

### CRITICS' CORNER

Because he opposes the twentieth-century trend toward visualizing black characters in a ghetto setting, Gaines avoids the strict "Southern négritude" school of fiction and prefers to reflect all of Western culture. In much of his work, he returns to early Afro-American history and its ties with agriculture. The appeal of *A Lesson Before Dying* lies partly in a straightforward first-person narration, rural settings, and verisimilitude of character. As the reader is drawn into Jefferson's last months, Grant's commentary reveals the vast inequities for blacks living near the post-Civil War cane fields of Louisiana. Lack of opportunities forces them to turn to good times, sex, liquor, and religion for release. Grant, the "Professor," is, in some ways, the exception, but his advantages bring him no solace as he attempts to educate the poor.

Gaines has earned a long list of awards for his honest portrayals of black America, notably a Rockefeller grant, Guggenheim fellowship, Black Academy of Arts and Letters award, Wallace Stegner award, Joseph Henry Jackson award, National Endowment of the Arts stipend, two awards from the Commonwealth Club of California, Louisiana Library Association award, MacArthur Foundation prize of \$355,000, San Francisco Arts Commission award, and an honorarium from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. *A Lesson Before Dying* earned the 1993 National Book Critics Circle Award. Gaines holds honorary doctorates from Denison University, Brown University, Bard College, Whittier College, and Louisiana State University. His work has been chosen as Book-of-the-Month Club alternate.

Three of Gaines's novels and one short story have adapted well to television. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, which CBS-TV aired in 1974, featured Cicely Tyson in the lead role and won nine Emmy awards. *A Gathering of Old Men*, also aired by CBS-TV in 1987, starred Lou Gossett, Jr., and Richard Widmark. A short work, "The Sky Is Gray" aired in 1980 as part of *The American Short Story* series. Directed by Stan Lathan and starring Olivia Cole, Margaret Avery, and Cleavon Little, it is available on video. HBO showcased *A Lesson Before Dying* on May 26, 1999, starring Don Cheadle as Grant Wiggins and Mekhi Phifer as Jefferson. Critics lauded the quality of director Joseph Sargent's craft and the performances of Cicely Tyson, Lisa Arrindell Anderson, and Irma P. Hall. A documentary—*Louisiana Stories: Ernest Gaines*—



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appeared in 1993.

### OTHER WORKS BY GAINES

*Catherine Carmier* (1964)  
*Of Love and Dust* (1967)  
*Bloodline* (1968)  
*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971)  
*In My Father's House* (1978)  
*A Gathering of Old Men* (1983)  
*A Lesson Before Dying* (1993)

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### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the impact of racism and neglect on children
2. To account for child labor and exploitation
3. To interpret social and community customs
4. To contrast the religious point of view of family members
5. To discuss the themes of longing and anger
6. To explain the main events in terms of Christian holidays
7. To analyze causes of regret
8. To describe attitudes based on gender
9. To describe elements of atmosphere and tone
10. To analyze the loss of a member of the community

### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To explain why execution looms in every scene
2. To analyze the symbolism of the title
3. To account for Grant's role as teacher and mentor
4. To contrast Grant and Ambrose as saviors
5. To justify suspicion at the jail
6. To predict how school children will think of Jefferson
7. To summarize the childhoods of Jefferson and Grant
8. To discuss the implications of Vivian's love and support
9. To summarize the roles of Emma, Lou, Henri, and Sam
10. To list examples of suspicion, cruelty, and callousness
11. To characterize the transformation in Grant and Jefferson
12. To analyze details, particularly the notebook, blue sky, and bags of food

### LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Ernest Gaines's narrative style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

**dialect language** peculiar to a limited population in a small geographical area. Often the language of the streets or the patois of a poorly educated segment of the population, dialect increases the authenticity of Jefferson's speech and his notebook, as with shet/shut, to be hod/to be hard, ax/ask, shef/sherriff, youmans/ humans, powder center/powder scent, chirren/children, teefs/teeth, 'tato/potato, yazir/yes sir, cain't yer/can't hear, clabba/clabber or buttermilk, and roast nyers/roasting ears, a synonym for corn on the cob. A few terms set the area of Bayonone apart from the greater South, in particular, tante, the French term for "aunt," and parain and nannan, a holy relationship of godparents committed at the baptism of an infant as surrogate parents. The most pathetic spoken dialect is Louis Washington's approximation of the pledge to the flag: "Plege legen toda flag. Ninety state. 'Merica. Er-er-yeah, which it stand. Visibly. Amen."

**first-person narrative** a story or series of actions told from the vantage point of a single observer. Ernest Gaines examines an execution from the eyewitness account of one man, whose scope of reference is muddled by regret, frustration, and contempt for his Louisiana homeland. The gradual strengthening of self-esteem in Jefferson performs a similar uplift in Grant Wiggins, who dignifies his profession in the community by working against time to inculcate dignity in Jefferson, an ignorant field hand.

**idiom** expressions or metaphors that function as vigorous, colorful synonyms for simpler, less demonstrative terms, e. g., "You the one?" for "Are you the one?," "jeck the switch," a reference to the executioner's job, "pulled that jazz" for "treated rudely," "pot spoon" for "serving spoon or ladle," "you the

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gump" for "you are the illiterate," "blasfemin the lord" for "swearing," and "sin box" for "radio."

**sermon** a speech, harangue, or moral lecture intended to educate, uplift, or advise hearers on ethical behavior or religious orthodoxy. Reverend Ambrose uses the blessing of food as an opportunity to impress Jefferson with his need of salvation. The prayer turns into a sermon.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING

The milieu of Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* is the agricultural South along the Gulf of Mexico. Set near Henri Pichot's plantation, part of the story takes place in a church, where Grant Wiggins holds school from late October to mid-April. The double use of a consecration table and pews cramps the school children, forcing them to kneel in front of the pew and use it like a table or to write on their laps. The yard contains a load of firewood, which the boys saw into stove wood to heat their classroom during the winter. From this vantage, Grant looks out on cane fields, where Jefferson began work at age six ferrying water by cart to field hands.

Because the church is near the residences of the black quarter, children can go home for lunch. When news and visitors arrive, individuals spread the details easily from one hearer to another. When Henri Pichot wants a conference with Grant, he sends his yardman across the street to summon the teacher. Grant's pause in the kitchen demonstrates the manners expected of a black visitor to a white landowner. The summons to the front room is unprecedented for Grant and Ambrose, who are unaccustomed to displays of courtesy.

Town is as segregated as the countryside. On the ten-mile drive beneath live oaks, Grant singles out separate schools and facilities as he makes his way to the Rainbow Club, his one respite from the hated schoolroom and his Tante Lou's surly manipulation. Even the darkened barroom and eating area carry their own stigma for black people. Grant feels forced to fight two self-important mulatto bricklayers, who deliberately goad him with hatred toward Jefferson. When Grant goes to Morgan's department store for a radio, the clerk is annoyed that he demands first quality and deliberately keeps him waiting while she chats with a non-paying customer.

Visits to the jail are the most riveting of the novel's scenes. Down a corridor of locked doors, Grant and the deputy pass other young men incarcerated in cells and stop at the last cell, which is set apart from the other inmates by one unit. In close quarters, Grant tries to talk to Jefferson, but finds him lying on his bunk with his face turned to the wall. The link with normality is the small window, which looks out on a sycamore tree and blue sky. Grant's success comes from the last written words of Jefferson, who is at last able to look at the sky and find beauty on his final day of life.

The use of a dayroom for a meeting with family, teacher, and preacher is a pitiful scenario. Paul must lead Jefferson to a picnic table in handcuffs and shackles. The shuffling step and bound wrists impede the boy from normal movement and cause him to grasp a spoon with both hands to channel gumbo to his mouth. Multiple humiliations and inhumanity deepen the anger in him and widen the gap that Grant must cross to ready the boy for execution.

### CROSS CURRICULAR SOURCES

#### Novels

William Armstrong, *Souder*  
Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land*  
Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*  
John Grisham, *The Chamber*  
Alex Haley, *Queen*  
Stephen King, *The Green Mile*  
Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*  
Terry McMillan, *Mama*  
Charles Portis, *True Grit*  
Richard Wright, *Native Son*

#### Plays

Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*  
Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*  
Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*

#### Poetry

*American Negro Poetry*  
*Black Voices*  
Rudyard Kipling, "Danny Deever"

#### Short Stories

Toni Cade Bambara, "Blues Ain't No Mockingbird"  
James Joyce, "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" and "The Dead"  
Carson McCullers, "Sucker"  
Richard Wright, "Almos' a Man"

#### Nonfiction

"Accents of the South Weave Mellifluous Tales," *Chicago Tribune*, January 1, 1998.  
Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*  
Edward Humes, *Mean Justice: A Town's Terror, a Prosecutor's Power, a Betrayal of Innocence*  
Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*  
Mark Mathabane, *Kaffir Boy*  
Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*  
"On the Bayou," *Chicago Tribune*, February 26, 2000  
Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking*  
Stephen E. Schonebaum, *Does Capitol Punishment Deter Crime?*  
Paul A. Winters, ed., *The Death Penalty (Opposing Viewpoints)*  
Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

#### CD-ROMs

*American Journey: The African-American Experience* (Primary Source Media)

#### Internet

"Black and White Perspectives on the American South,"  
<[www.gactr.uga.edu/GCQ/gcqw95/blackwhite.html](http://www.gactr.uga.edu/GCQ/gcqw95/blackwhite.html)>  
Briggs, Cassandra, "Louisiana Literature,"  
<[www.lacollege.edu/classes/en446/prefiled/gaines/forms.html](http://www.lacollege.edu/classes/en446/prefiled/gaines/forms.html)>  
"Counseling Services for Families,"  
<[www.nire.org/famcou63.htm](http://www.nire.org/famcou63.htm)>  
"Crisis, Grief, and Healing," <[www.webhealing.com](http://www.webhealing.com)>  
"Death Penalty Information"  
<[sun.soci.niu.edu/~critcrim/dp/dp.html](http://sun.soci.niu.edu/~critcrim/dp/dp.html)>  
"Our Culture—Famous People: Southern Louisiana,"  
<[hob.com/louisiana/culturefamousla.html](http://hob.com/louisiana/culturefamousla.html)>

#### Videos

*Dead Man Walking*  
*The Defiant Ones*  
*The Green Mile*  
*The Power of One*  
*Ragtime*  
*Separate But Equal*  
*The Shawshank Redemption*  
*Souder*

## A LESSON BEFORE DYING

### THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in *A Lesson Before Dying* should include these aspects:

#### Themes

- murder
- injustice
- poverty
- ignorance
- family
- salvation
- racism
- self-esteem
- exploitation
- heroism

#### Motifs

- coping with a manipulative family member
- seeking escape from a no-win profession
- comprehending the needs of a condemned man
- gaining self-esteem by giving of self

### MEANING STUDY

Below are significant words, phrases, or sentences from the novel. Explain each in context. Chapter and page numbers pinpoint each entry so that you can re-read the passage in which it appears.

1. The big mulatto from Pulaya had predicted it, hadn't he? (Chap. 8, p. 62)  
(A mulatto is a person of mixed racial parentage, usually equal parts Caucasian and Negro. The term also applies to the children of Creoles. Depending on point of view, the term can be either a pejorative, racial slur, status symbol, or elitism.)
2. Hitler had his reasons, and even the Ku Klux Klans of the South for what they do. (Chap. 8, p. 63)  
(Like Hitler's Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan is a lawless fraternity of white supremacists. Members require secret oaths before a burning cross and allegiance to a central board that assigns sheet-draped members to terrorize groups such as homosexuals, socialists, union leaders, Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Asians, and non-white immigrants. Justified by an illogical patchwork of biblical and historical lore glorifying Aryan stock, this male-dominated racist group began as an outgrowth of poor whites' frustration with the end of slavery during the Civil War. General Nathan Bedford Forrest started the group in 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee, and served as the first Imperial Wizard. The Klan enjoyed a revival during the civil rights era.)
3. "I'm Creole," he said. "Can't you tell?" (Chap. 8, p. 64)  
(A Creole is an American native, especially from the Gulf states, who is born of mixed African, French, Portuguese, or Spanish descent. The term also names characteristic cuisine, dance, style of dress, and patois spoken by Creoles.)
4. Listening to them, I could remember back to the time before Jackie came to the major leagues, when it was Joe Louis that everyone talked about. (Chap. 12, p. 88)  
(Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis became standard bearers for racial equality. Louis broke the color barrier by winning the heavyweight boxing championship in 1936. He lost to Max Schmeling in 1937, then reclaimed the title in 1938 by defeating Schmeling in a rematch. Jackie Robinson was the first black baseball player to depart the black leagues and play with an all-white team.)
5. David will meet Goliath again. (Chap. 12, p. 88)  
(Blacks think of their struggles in biblical terms by depicting themselves as David, the Hebrew shepherd, and identifying Goliath as the overweening white majority. When King Saul's singer agreed to fight Goliath, he dressed in the king's armor, but tossed it aside as too unwieldy. In place of infantry equipment, he took his sling and selected smooth stones to whirl above his head and release at the giant. One stone to the forehead killed Goliath. David exulted in victory by slicing off the giant's head. He rose to the throne and became the first leader to unite the Hebrews in to a single nation around the capital city of Jerusalem.)
6. He spoke of Yeats, O'Casey, Joyce—names I had never heard before. (Chap. 12, 89)  
(In college, Grant learns about the great 19th- and early 20th-century writers from Ireland. William Butler Yeats was known for poetry and for supporting drama. Sean O'Casey was a master of short fiction. James Joyce was the author of *Dubliners*, *Finnegan's Wake*, and the autobiographical novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.)
7. And a name he repeated over and over was Parnell. (Chap. 12, p. 89)  
(Charles Stewart Parnell was an Irish nationalist and member of Parliament who raised funds to support the fight for Ireland's freedom from English overlords. He drew supporters by raising funds and rabble-rousing, but lost stature after he was publicly humiliated as an adulterer.)
8. Besides shrimps, she had put smoked sausage and chicken in the gumbo, and she had seasoned it well with green onions, filé, and black pepper. (Chap. 24, p. 189)  
(Filé is a powdered flavoring made from ground young sassafras leaves, which thicken soups and stew. When added to a stew of meat, seafood, and vegetables, especially okra, the powder stabilizes gumbo, a thick paste served hot over rice. It is one of the distinctive dishes of the Louisiana delta.)
9. "When's Easter?" he asked.  
"Tomorrow is Good Friday." (Chap. 28, p. 221)  
(Grant clarifies for Jefferson the progression of holy days that make up Lent, the season that precedes Easter Sunday, when Christ rose from the dead. The holiday begins with Ash Wednesday, a holy day preceded in New Orleans, the Caribbean, and other parts of the Catholic world by Mardi Gras or Carnival, a riotous celebration of fun and carnality. It precedes the austerities imposed by Lent, when the faithful give up something to express their willingness to suffer. Easter week includes Maundy Thursday, when Christ gave his final commands to his disciples, Good Friday, when he was crucified, and Easter Sunday, the holiest day in Christendom.)
10. And He never said a mumbling word. (Chap. 28, p. 223)  
(Jefferson returns to this phrase from a Negro spiritual to remind himself that Christ suffered judgment, public humiliation, torment, and a slow, painful death without rebuking his adversaries.)

### COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers with quotations from the novel.

## A LESSON BEFORE DYING

### Motivation

1. What causes Emma to demand education for Jefferson?

*(At the murder trial, Emma hears the defense attorney plead for mercy for Jefferson, who is charged with robbery and murder of Alcee Gropé at his liquor store. The attorney explains that he would "just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this." The insult galvanizes the elderly godmother to protect her godson from an ignoble death and permanent insult to his good name.*

*When Grant finds Emma and Lou together, he quickly realizes that Emma expects him to uplift Jefferson through educational visits to the jail. She declares, "I don't want them to kill no hog . . . I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet." The severity of the insult extends to her, the family, and all black people who live in the quarters and who perform manual labor for the superior white landowners of Bayonne. To Mr. Henri, she justifies her intention: "Jefferson go'n need me, but I'm too old to be going up there. I want somebody else take my place.")*

### Setting

2. Describe the quarter.

*(The black characters share a community that has its roots in slavery. Around the town of Bayonne, seat of the parish of St. Raphael, black community members live close enough to know everybody's business and, like one large family, to share joys and sorrows such as Stella's baby, stabbings, Christmas carols, and Emma's sorrow. Cane fields stretch outward from dirt lanes and simple cottages. Workers begin learning in childhood the seasonal rhythms of cane harvesting and grinding. At home, residents tend gardens and grow their own sweet potatoes, corn, and other vegetables. When guests come to comfort the sick and afflicted, cups of coffee and slices of cake speak the welcome of their hosts. However, visits from blacks to white landowners exacerbate sneering patronism and offer a glimpse of the house from the confines of the kitchen.*

*Like their enslaved forebears, Bayonne's agrarian black laborers live on the outskirts of Henri Pichot's plantation and maintain the community institutions of old. Church on Sunday brings them together for singing, particularly at the monthly Termination Sunday, for which they practice favorite hymns and spirituals. Weekdays from late October to mid-April, area black children from primer to sixth grade attend classes at the church and study under Grant Wiggins, a local black teacher. Holidays bring locals together at the church for an annual Christmas program that includes a re-enactment of the birth of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew, who depicts the arrival of wisemen to the stable. Humble gatherings like the reception after the Christmas program involve shared food cooked Louisiana style and served informally.)*

### Character Development

3. How does Jefferson respond to his sentence?

*(At age 21, Jefferson is young and inexperienced. He regrets that he will die without enjoying life. When Grant first visits the cell, he finds Jefferson lying on his bunk and facing the wall. Subsequent Fridays change little, except for Jefferson's insistence that he should be treated and fed like a hog rather than humanely. He rejects food from his godmother and dejectedly offers his bounty to fellow inmates.*

*As Grant penetrates the crusty shell of anger and regret, Jefferson begins to speak his mind, to ask questions about the execution and Jesus's crucifixion, and to make requests for his last days. He welcomes a radio, on which he can hear Randy's Record Shop. He begins to look beyond self toward Emma, who is too old and frail to tolerate his surliness. In shackles and handcuffs, he is led to the dayroom to mingle with guests and listens to Mose Ambrose's prayer for his salvation.*

*In the final days before the April 8 execution date, Jefferson sleeps little and begins writing his thoughts and feelings in a notebook. He confesses to Grant that he is sorry for insulting Vivian and that he regrets selecting Bear and Brother for companions. His ability to express gratitude and to find beauty in the last blue sky he will see suggests that Jefferson will face execution like a dignified adult. According to Paul, who conveys details of the last moments to Grant, Jefferson asks about community members and courageously faces punishment for wrongdoing.)*

### Historical Milieu

4. How does the execution express the racial climate of the late 1940s?

*(Set two years after World War II, the story expresses the need for an end to the suffocating dual class system of Bayonne, Louisiana. Work has altered in the plantation district because the war deprived men like Henri Pichot of cheap labor. There are more labor-saving devices in his kitchen, where Inez serves in the same capacity that Emma once worked. Yet, the attitude toward uneducated blacks remains harsh and dismissive.*

*To Grant, in the era preceding the Civil Rights movement, the prospects for young people like his pupils are as grim as they were when he was a schoolboy. He reflects on the violent milieu that afflicted his own generation with sudden death and forced survivors to flee their homeland. Like Matthew Antoine, who died an embittered former teacher, Grant carries the burden of despair common to idealists who hope to prevent crime and uplift youth to more positive horizons. In the face of a hopeless task, Grant accepts the responsibility for preparing Jefferson to die honorably.)*

### Theme

5. What does the author reveal about self-esteem?

*(The characters of the novel bear an overwhelming burden of self-denigration. Emma and Lou, two elderly retired workers, resort to the trickery and manipulation of the powerless to achieve their aim. By brow-beating Grant, they initiate the hard job of visiting and cheering Jefferson at his cell. The boy's deep despair further debilitates Emma and causes Lou and Ambrose to insist that Grant work a miracle of reclamation.*

*At the heart of the first-person narrative lie Grant's personal doubts about his career and progress. After numerous failures, he admits to Jefferson his own lack of religious faith. By describing a hero, Grant explains to Jefferson what is required if the condemned man is to defeat self-satisfaction among whites who think of the prisoner as an animal. As Grant moves beyond his paralyzing self-condemnation, he fulfills the definition of hero and endears himself to the boy, who has only a few days to live.*

*At an emotional low point, Grant declares, "I know*

## A LESSON BEFORE DYING

what it means to be a slave. I am a slave." His uplift comes in an unexpected form—the pathetic notebook, written in semi-literate longhand, expresses Jefferson's renewed spirit. Thus, Paul is able to bring the letter from Jefferson to Grant along with strong words of praise that Grant has truly worked a miracle.)

### Interpretation

6. What does the novel say about the black male ego? (In Chapter 21, Grant tries to explain to Vivian why black males carry a disproportionate human burden in the quarters. Connecting his philosophy to the past, he declares, "We black men have failed to protect our women since the time of slavery." The expectation that men should protect women forces males either to stay in an untenable social milieu or to flee, leaving women to survive alone and rear fatherless children in a hopeless underclass. The cycle repeats with each male birth: "They hope he will be the one to change this vicious circle.")

Grant, like the other black Louisiana males before him, knows the powerful urge to effect change and the counter-pull to flee the quarter and live a more normal life with his parents in California. He explains the onus of history: "It is too heavy a burden because of all the others who have run away and left their burdens behind." Escapism, he explains, is the only antidote to indenture to local plantation owners or to the insanity that grips the minds of men whom society has symbolically and politically castrated.)

### Conflict

7. Why does Grant have to team with Mose Ambrose? (Because Jefferson faces both a metaphysical and intellectual gap, he needs both the quarter's preacher and the teacher. Grant prefers to keep his obligation separate from fundamentalist soul-saving and insults Ambrose with rude body language and an absence of the expected obeisance to the local minister. Ambrose takes the slight personally and lambastes Grant for flaunting superiority, which he doesn't deserve. In Ambrose's opinion, it is Grant who is uneducated because he has no respect for a higher power.)

As Jefferson begins to question his life's purpose during the last days, Grant shepherds him toward acceptance and urges him to be polite to Emma, his only relative. The question about Jesus's crucifixion and his silent acceptance of doom recurs in Jefferson's conversations. Grant finds himself in the uncomfortable position of teaching him the chronology of Jesus's last days and the customs of the Easter holiday. The unpleasant duty of talking about a deity forces Grant to admit that he, like Jefferson, has neglected the spiritual side of self. Without formally allying with Ambrose, Grant admits, "Have I done anything to make you not believe? . . . For at this moment, what else is there?" Subconsciously, he bears the old preacher's message of salvation in different terms, but with essentially the same goal.)

### Atmosphere

8. How does the last day alter Jefferson and his keepers? (In Chapter 30, the final days become more real, more terrible than the jailers anticipate. Sam, who has never presided at an execution, leaves home early because he wants order and performance according to regulations. Paul and the other staff members maintain hard faces and

postures as they offer Jefferson a warm shower with a new bar of soap and clean clothing. The pathetic courtesies that await the doomed man are few, but he relishes a last meal and writes faithfully in his notebook as sleep eludes him.

The arrival of a wooden chair with leather straps begins the staff's unavoidable preparations for execution. After they situate the chair in the lower level of the courthouse, the noisy test run intensifies the grimness in outlook of deputies and local workers on Bayonne's main street. Because Grant withdraws his point of view, the reader must rely on the notebook and Paul's testimony about the shaving of Jefferson's head, wrists, and ankles and the strapping on of electrodes. Of his colleagues, Paul is able to state that Jefferson "was the strongest man in that crowded room." The onlookers crowded together with "each other to lean on." Speaking for himself, Paul admits, "After they put the death cloth over his face, I couldn't watch anymore. I looked down at the floor. . . . I heard the two jolts, but I wouldn't look up. I'll never forget the sound of that generator as long as I live on this earth.")

### Author Purpose

9. Why does Gaines return to his homeland for subject matter and setting? (Ernest Gaines is wise to speak of his home and to expand on the sufferings of blacks under a plantation hegemony that keeps local laborers poor, ignorant, and dependent on supercilious landowners like Henri Pichot. By contrasting the simple courtesies of Lou's kitchen with the cold, unfeeling reception at Henri's kitchen, Gaines expresses a fact he grew up with—the social and moral dividing line that produces a permanent underclass. The unequal system allows white juries and judges to go on condemning black criminals beyond the letter of the law. Gaines sets up a background so compellingly humble and undeserved that he establishes without question the bias under which Jefferson went to work at age six, learned nearly nothing of the outside world, and met his fate for sharing a few leisure moments with local criminals.)

Without belaboring the issue of capital punishment, Gaines stretches out scenes of his past in testimony to Jefferson's hopeless milieu and the likelihood that powerlessness will pressure him into crime. The purity of his down-home memories touches the reader in select details—a small boy playing with a bug, the infantilism of the Bok, a girl weeping at the blackboard as she tries to write a straight sentence, and the gratitude of Jefferson for a kiss from his cousin Estelle. Gaines presses Grant to the extremes of tolerance when the limited rewards of teaching elementary school force him to consider fleeing Bayonne to find equality and manhood in a more tolerant California community. Because Gaines has lived both milieus, he can speak for the young male idealist and confidently set up a situation that tests Grant and his doomed student to their human limits.)

### Structure

10. Why does Gaines select the teacher and Jefferson as first-person narrators? (Gaines's limitation of the story to Grant's and Jefferson's points of view serves several purposes. It allows the author to express a masculine outlook on plantation patri-



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archy, which forces Jefferson to face death from a jail cell and Grant to stand and wait for over two hours in answer to the summons of a bigoted white landowner. By limiting the beginning and ending of the story to Grant's experiences, the author also avoids a complicated explanation of the courtroom scene and a grisly eyewitness account of execution, both of which Grant learns secondhand.

Even more essential to the stark revelation of Jefferson's feelings is the notebook, a monument to Grant's teaching and to the illiterate efforts of a doomed young man to take leave of a short, pathetic existence. With a tenderness unlike his conversations with Grant and visitors, Jefferson speaks a heartfelt truth about regret and about love of life. From a dingy, crowded cell, he is able to lie wide-eyed each night and look through the bars to the sky. The gradual appearance of blue sky is a death knell for Jefferson's body, yet, it crowns his final moments of life with an appreciation of beauty, family, friendship, and nature.

Jefferson's death returns the narrative to Grant alone. The tears that flow from him in the last scene release some of the pent-up frustration at manipulation by a hard-handed great aunt and the end of a job that pushes him to the limits of his tenuous professional dedication. After forcing Jefferson to recognize his own humanity, Grant displays an emotional grounding and sincere love for the people of the quarter.)

### ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

#### Business and Economics

1. Describe the farm products and job opportunities for skilled and unskilled blacks of Bayonne and the nearby plantations. Explain why the sweetness of cane is an irony in the misery of the quarters.
2. Explain why black women like Vivian were lucky to work as teachers. Contrast her work with that of Inez, Thelma, Lou, and Emma.

#### Cinema

View films with imprisoned and condemned characters, such as *The Green Mile*, *Bird Man of Alcatraz*, *True Grit*, *Dead Man Walking*, and *Ragtime*. Compare the movies' settings, themes, and dialogue to those of *A Lesson Before Dying*. Comment on the interplay of people of different ethnic, social, educational, and religious backgrounds.

#### Drama

1. Draw stage settings for a dramatization of Grant's Christmas program, the night before the execution, Jefferson's receipt of the radio, the first meal in the dayroom, two old women sitting in the courtroom at the sentencing, and Vivian's arrival at the end of the barroom fight. Supply sketches of costumes and props.
2. Create a storyboard account of the robbery and murder. Indicate at what point Jefferson becomes an accomplice. List his crimes and suggest appropriate punishments for them.

#### Geography

1. Use topographical maps to describe the terrain the story covers.
2. Draw a map of Bayonne. Note the location of separate schools, Morgan's department store, the mortuary, courthouse and jail, cement plant, sawmill, slaughterhouse,

bank, department stores, professional offices, and the Rainbow Club.

#### History and Social Studies

1. Compose an extended definition of social isolation. Explain why the term describes Grant, Ambrose, and Jefferson.
2. Contrast female characters and their attitudes toward family, responsibility, and love. Consider Emma, Lou, Eloise, Vivian, Grant's grandmother, and Thelma.
3. Explain why the community takes an interest in the success of Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson and in the fate of Jefferson.
4. Based on your understanding of the novel, lead a panel discussion of the effects of imprisonment, poverty, racism, illiteracy, and violence on family life. Support your opinions with facts from census reports, sociological surveys, and statistics obtained from almanacs and economic and health surveys.

#### Language Arts

1. List phrases that underscore the prosecutor's harshness, the defense attorney's insult, and Emma's insistence that Jefferson die like a man.
2. Compose an extended definition of dialect. Analyze the content of Jefferson's notebook. Determine what aspects of grammar and punctuation are unknown to him.
3. Record aloud descriptive passages from *A Lesson Before Dying*. Consider the purchase of a radio, barroom fight, shared gumbo, decorating the Christmas tree, sawing wood, walking in shackles, driving to the courthouse, carrying water to field laborers, and setting up "Gruesome Gerty."
4. Pantomime symbolic or significant episodes, for instance, Lou's preparation for Termination Sunday.
5. Read aloud from nonfiction, novels, plays, speeches, and stories that describe racism, child abuse, neglect, and poverty, such as Mark Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy*.
6. Analyze each line of the Twenty-third Psalm. Determine which images would appeal to a man facing death alone. Explain how the poem suits a lonely shepherd like David.
7. Make a web site or bulletin board that identifies important words and phrases from the novel.

#### Law

1. Read aloud state laws governing crimes committed in the novel, especially a public brawling, adultery, robbery, child labor, stabbing, and murder. Determine whether the judge has alternative punishments in Jefferson's case.
2. Make a chart of advice to Emma concerning her rights as a guardian to visit Jefferson and bring him clothing, food, and personal items. Draw parallels with the sheriff's right to refuse visitors and gifts and to limit a prisoner's contact with other inmates and outsiders.

#### Psychology and Health

1. Explain with diagrams the pressures that impinge on Jefferson. Justify his complaint that the community and family ask a lot of him.
2. Lead a debate concerning the best methods of lifting spirits among jail inmates. Consider the use of visitors, religion, group therapy, music, shared activities, physical activity, and food.
3. Compose a lecture on emotional trauma as found in

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Emma and Grant. List causes, symptoms, and treatment for people like Jefferson, who have no hope of surviving jail.

### Religion

1. Compose a graveside service for Alcee Gropé, Brother, Bear, or Jefferson. Indicate how neighbors can ease the suffering of the families and comfort Emma.
2. Describe the role of religion in Grant's life after he leaves for the university. Explain why Ambrose considers him uneducated.
3. Outline the parallels between the lives of Jesus and Jefferson. Note why Jefferson repeats, "He never said a mumbling word."

### Speech

1. Organize a discussion of racism and other forms of persecution, classism, and exclusion. Answer these basic questions: What makes people belittle identifiable groups, especially the ignorant and members of a minority race? How does prejudice cause tense situations? How do speeches, books, plays, monuments, music, murals, and other forms of creativity help quell ridicule, hatred, segregation, and prejudice?
2. Compose a presentation to parents, ministers, and friends of condemned inmates. Prepare them for difficulties in visiting the jail.

### ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. List examples of cruelty and racism in various characters, for example, Sam's rudeness to jail visitors.
2. Compile a list of actions that demonstrate community spirit, particularly the Christmas program, visits to Emma, presents and visits to the jail, and concern on the day of execution.
3. Compose a scene in which Grant speaks freely to Ambrose about his loss of faith and his experiences with Jefferson.
4. Make a character list and explain the character flaws of each.
5. Account for the recurrence of the motif of courtesy, especially from Inez in Henri's kitchen, toward Vivian at Lou's house, in the cell from Jefferson, from students toward Grant and Dr. Joseph, among church-goers, from Paul to Grant, and in personal remarks in the notebook.

## ANSWER KEY

### VOCABULARY TEST

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. L  | 11. K |
| 2. F | 7. A  | 12. E |
| 3. J | 8. N  | 13. M |
| 4. O | 9. D  | 14. B |
| 5. I | 10. H | 15. G |

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. A  |
| 2. A | 7. D  |
| 3. D | 8. B  |
| 4. C | 9. C  |
| 5. A | 10. C |

#### Part II: Matching (30 points)

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. A | 6. D  | 11. K |
| 2. G | 7. O  | 12. N |
| 3. L | 8. H  | 13. J |
| 4. C | 9. E  | 14. I |
| 5. M | 10. B | 15. F |

#### Part III: Short Answer (20 points)

- |                |                          |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Emma        | 6. corn                  |
| 2. April 8     | 7. Grant's               |
| 3. Jesus       | 8. Thelma, Joe           |
| 4. Baton Rouge | 9. Louis Washington, Jr. |
| 5. Irene       | 10. Parnell              |

#### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Character Identification (30 points)

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. G | 6. O  | 11. K |
| 2. C | 7. H  | 12. D |
| 3. L | 8. F  | 13. N |
| 4. A | 9. B  | 14. I |
| 5. E | 10. J | 15. M |

#### Part II: True/False (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. F  |
| 2. T | 7. T  |
| 3. T | 8. F  |
| 4. T | 9. T  |
| 5. F | 10. F |

#### Part III: Completion (20 points)

1. Brother, grinding
2. University, six
3. superintendent, pledge to the flag
4. Grant, white man
5. principal, French

#### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

## A LESSON BEFORE DYING

### VOCABULARY TEST

Complete each of the following sentences with an appropriate word from the list below. Place the letter of your response in the blank at left.

- |               |            |                |
|---------------|------------|----------------|
| A. immobile   | F. vicious | K. corrugated  |
| B. contempt   | G. flaunt  | L. jimsonweeds |
| C. quarter    | H. primer  | M. antebellum  |
| D. electrodes | I. filé    | N. gruesome    |
| E. dominated  | J. Creole  | O. gesture     |

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. He told of how the trees had been cut in the pasture and dragged back to the \_\_\_\_\_ and how the girls had washed the leaves to make the tree presentable.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change the \_\_\_\_\_ circle—which he never does.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. "I'm \_\_\_\_\_," he said. "Can't you tell?"
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I made a respectful \_\_\_\_\_ for him to precede me, but he would not move, was afraid to move, until Inez took the lead.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Besides shrimp, she had put smoked sausage and chicken in the gumbo, and she had seasoned it well with green onions, \_\_\_\_\_, and black pepper.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. There was nothing out there to see but the \_\_\_\_\_ and crabgrass, and the rows of cane that ran parallel to the yard and about a hundred feet away from the kitchen where we sat.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. His godmother became as \_\_\_\_\_ as a great stone or as one of our oak or cypress stumps.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. A woman was saying that she had seen it and it looked just \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. He said \_\_\_\_\_ had to be attached there as well as to the head, and all that had to be shaved very clean.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I assigned Odessa Freeman \_\_\_\_\_ and first grades.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Like so many country churches, it was wood-framed, long and narrow, with a \_\_\_\_\_ tin roof and a bell tower.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. But how could I not think about something that had \_\_\_\_\_ my thoughts for nearly six months?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Behind me was Henri Pichot's gray and white \_\_\_\_\_ house, sitting on its foundation high above the ground.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. In him—he did not say all this, but we felt it—there was nothing but hatred for himself as well as \_\_\_\_\_ for us.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Vivian Baptiste was a beautiful woman, and she knew it; but she didn't \_\_\_\_\_ it, it was just there.

**A LESSON BEFORE DYING**

**COMPREHENSION TEST A**

**Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)**

Select the phrase that completes each of the following sentences. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Grant is angry that
  - A. Antoine views him with contempt.
  - B. Lou and Emma force him to go to the jail alone.
  - C. the radio requires batteries.
  - D. Henri bets on Jefferson's execution.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Schoolchildren
  - A. kneel in place during the execution.
  - B. send a bag of sweet potatoes to the jail.
  - C. begin work in the fields as water carriers.
  - D. resent having to chop wood and decorate a tree.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. People in Bayonne
  - A. see no evidence of Gruesome Gerty.
  - B. ignore Emma's suffering.
  - C. agree that Jefferson deserves the death penalty.
  - D. share the horror of execution.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Grant asks Jefferson to
  - A. pray with Ambrose.
  - B. enjoy his last blue sky.
  - C. become a stronger man than Grant.
  - D. express gratitude to Paul.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Grant is eager to
  - A. tell Vivian of Jefferson's progress.
  - B. beat up Creoles.
  - C. listen to Randy's Record Shop with Jefferson.
  - D. prove that Sam is a bigot and racist.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Tante Lou
  - A. raises Grant because his parents abandon him.
  - B. insults Vivian for wanting to marry her nephew.
  - C. holds a spoonful of gumbo for Jefferson to eat.
  - D. leaves spare change for the other inmates.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Ambrose admits that
  - A. he has to save Grant's soul.
  - B. visits with Jefferson are pointless.
  - C. Emma expects a lot from his prayers.
  - D. he lies to parishioners.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. The superintendent's visits
  - A. require checking teeth and inspecting firewood.
  - B. are half as frequent to black schools.
  - C. end the practice of supplying hand-me-down books to blacks.
  - D. support discipline with a Westcott ruler.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Jefferson repeats
  - A. lines from "You Are My Sunshine."
  - B. his insult to Vivian.
  - C. "He never said a mumbling word."
  - D. his demand for a gallon of ice cream and a pot spoon.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Shaving precedes
  - A. a trial run with Gruesome Gerty.
  - B. Ambrose's reading of the Twenty-third Psalm.
  - C. placement of electrodes.
  - D. a shower with new soap.

## A LESSON BEFORE DYING

### Part II: Matching (30 points)

Match the following actions with places from the list below. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- |   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| _____ 1. Grant visits his parents.                            | A. California        |
| _____ 2. Vivian thinks she conceived a child.                 | B. Rainbow Club      |
| _____ 3. Bok gets excited and points.                         | C. Pichot kitchen    |
| _____ 4. Grant waits over two hours for Henri.                | D. Lou's house       |
| _____ 5. Vivian offers Grant a bottle.                        | E. cell              |
| _____ 6. Vivian serves cake to Lou and her guests.            | F. Morgan's store    |
| _____ 7. Grant and Jefferson walk together.                   | G. cane field        |
| _____ 8. A generator supplies power for the electrocution.    | H. truck             |
| _____ 9. Jefferson enjoys his "sin box."                      | I. Gropé's store     |
| _____ 10. Vivian helps Grant recover from a blow to the head. | J. Xavier College    |
| _____ 11. Paul delivers the notebook.                         | K. schoolyard        |
| _____ 12. Local people sing Termination Songs.                | L. Christmas program |
| _____ 13. Vivian met her husband.                             | M. Vivian's kitchen  |
| _____ 14. Two white men observe Jefferson's crime.            | N. church            |
| _____ 15. Grant demands a boxed item.                         | O. dayroom           |

### Part III: Short Answer (20 points)

Supply a word or phrase in answer to the following questions. Place your response in the blank provided.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Who slaps Jefferson?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. What is the date of the execution?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. What martyr died on Friday between noon and 3:00?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Where do Vivian and Grant go for weekends alone?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Who supervises Grant's classes while he is gone?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. What vegetable does Jefferson request?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Whose classmates scattered, some to crime and others to their deaths?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Who donates money toward a radio?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Who is Grant's worst pupil?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. What Irish hero intrigues Grant?

### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Explain why Emma wants Jefferson educated.
2. Contrast the racism of Henri, Sam, the defense attorney, Louis, and the Creole bricklayers.
3. Account for Jefferson's change of attitude.
4. Summarize events surrounding Alcee Gropé's death.
5. Describe Grant's teaching methods.



## A LESSON BEFORE DYING

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Character Identification (30 points)

Match each of the following descriptions from the novel with a character name. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- |  |                     |
|--|---------------------|
| _____ 1. uses a broom as a weapon                        | A. Gropé            |
| _____ 2. resents Grant's posture in the shape of a cross | B. Bok              |
| _____ 3. calls Jefferson a hog                           | C. Lou              |
| _____ 4. refuses Bear's request for credit               | D. Paul             |
| _____ 5. wants the children every weekend                | E. Vivian's husband |
| _____ 6. admits that he lies every week                  | F. Dr. Joseph       |
| _____ 7. helps Emma obtain permission to use the dayroom | G. Thelma           |
| _____ 8. asks for more emphasis on hygiene               | H. Edna             |
| _____ 9. gives up a marble                               | I. Inez             |
| _____ 10. coughs pitifully                               | J. Emma             |
| _____ 11. calls for a revolver                           | K. Joe              |
| _____ 12. believes Grant is a great teacher              | L. defense attorney |
| _____ 13. believes Grant will fail as a teacher          | M. bricklayers      |
| _____ 14. offers Grant food and coffee as he waits       | N. Antoine          |
| _____ 15. flaunt their status as Creoles                 | O. Ambrose          |

#### Part II: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if any part is false.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Henri takes Louis's bet of a case of liquor that Jefferson will plead for his life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Sam holds a grudge that Edna intervened in jail policy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The only present under the tree is from the children to Jefferson.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Deputy Clark is less encouraging than Paul.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Jefferson denies that he did anything wrong.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Irene admits that she loves Grant.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Grant considers fleeing Bayonne and going back to California.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. On April 8, everyone in the quarter stands outside waiting for news.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. The notebook expresses thanks for visits, gifts, and a kiss.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Sam refuses Alcee Gropé's family a place among witnesses.

## A LESSON BEFORE DYING

### Part III: Completion (20 points)

Fill in the blanks below with a word or phrase which completes the sentence. Place your answer in the space provided.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ and Bear had demanded credit until cane \_\_\_\_\_ ended.
2. Ten years earlier, Grant had gone to the \_\_\_\_\_ and had been teaching locally for the past \_\_\_\_\_ years
3. The \_\_\_\_\_ arrives and calls on Louis Washington, the worst child in the school, who can recite only a few words from the \_\_\_\_\_.
4. When Jefferson kneels by the food bag and gobbles like a pig, \_\_\_\_\_ accuses him of letting the \_\_\_\_\_ win.
5. While Vivian speaks to the \_\_\_\_\_, Grant writes "I love you" in \_\_\_\_\_ on the blackboard

### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Describe how the town and its residents respond to the execution.
2. Give Vivian's reasons for remaining in Bayonne.
3. Discuss Antoine's influence on Grant.
4. Account for the limited educational opportunities for blacks.
5. Summarize events that occur in the last day of Jefferson's life.



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