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**Literature**  
Teaching Unit  
*Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide*



## A Lesson Before Dying

by Ernest J. Gaines

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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# Literature Teaching Unit

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## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define literary terms and be able to cite examples of them from *A Lesson Before Dying*.
2. define important vocabulary words used in the novel.
3. identify and trace the development of the main themes of the novel.
4. identify the point of view of the storyteller and discuss the effect of the author's use of this particular point of view.
5. pick out significant events, scenes, or speeches and explain their significance to the novel as a whole.
6. identify the important conflicts which lead to the climax.
7. explain how the author resolves (or does not resolve) the various conflicts brought up during the course of the plot.
8. discuss how the setting influences the ways in which the action occurs.
9. trace the development of the major relationships in the novel.
10. recognize several important quotes and explain their importance to the general understanding of the novel.
11. discuss the importance of the supporting characters to the success of the plot.
12. trace the growth and development of the main character.

Note: The novel contains the word "nigger" and infrequent profanity, which may be offensive to some students. *A Lesson Before Dying* also contains one short scene depicting love-making.

All references come from the Vintage Contemporaries edition of *A Lesson Before Dying*, copyright 1993.

### Questions for Discussion and Essay

1. Discuss the time period during which this story takes place. Do you find this time period to be realistic in terms of the action? Explain your answer.
2. Tante Lou and Irene are very important characters, both in Grant's life and to the book as a whole. Briefly describe each supporting character and discuss the influences on the main character and on the novel in general.
3. Relationships play an important role in this novel. Choose any two important relationships revealed in this book and briefly describe how each is influential in the development of each participant's personality and behavior.
4. Describe the interactions between Grant and Vivian. What do the characters seem to want from the other? How does the end of the novel resolve their relationship?
5. Describe the interactions between Grant and Jefferson. What does each character seem to want or need from the other? How does the end of the novel resolve their relationship?
6. Vivian is an influential character. Pick out two or three significant scenes in which she says or does something important to the course of the novel. Using these scenes, explain her importance to the plot.
7. Choose two or three scenes where the students Grant is in charge of say or do something that affects him and the course of the novel. Explain why their words and actions are important.
8. There are numerous references to racial prejudice in this novel. Identify two or three of these references, naming the characters involved and the result of their attitudes and actions.
9. Consider how this novel ends, not just for Grant, but for other characters, too. What one (or possibly two) thing(s) would you change if you could rewrite the story? Why would you make these specific changes? How would they influence other parts of the novel?
10. Identify the action that occurs in the novel, including the introduction, conflicts, rising action, climax, denouement, and resolution.

# A Lesson Before Dying

## Chapter One

### VOCABULARY

**conspiracy** – a plot, scheme, plan  
**modicum** – a small amount, little bit, scrap

1. Who is the narrator of this story?

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2. Why is Jefferson on trial?

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3. Describe the jury for Jefferson's trial.

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4. What is the setting for this story?

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5. Based Jefferson's lawyer's arguments, explain why the defense attorney did a poor job.

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6. What are the jury's verdict and the judge's sentence?

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## Chapter Eight

### VOCABULARY

**grudgingly** – reluctantly

**relented** – gave in, changed one’s mind, yielded

**mulatto** – a child from one white and one black parent, mixed blood

**Creole** – a person of mixed French and black parentage

1. What memory does the delivery of firewood to the school prompt?

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2. Why did Antoine hate Grant?

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3. Antoine hated being in the plantation school, why did he stay?

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## Chapter Eleven

### VOCABULARY

**trusty** – [trustee] a term referring to a trusted inmate who has earned special privileges  
**pralines** – a special kind of candy made with pecans and brown sugar  
**cynical** – skeptical, distrustful, suspicious

1. Why does Jefferson ask if Grant has brought corn for his meal?

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2. What argument does Grant try with Jefferson to get him to eat, talk, and try to get through the ordeal with dignity?

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