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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



A Lesson Before Dying
Ernest J. Gaines



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Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

A Lesson Before Dying

Chapter 1

1. The narrator says that he knows what the verdict of the trial will be. Have you ever had to go through a situation, a difficult one or an easy one, even though you knew how it would turn out? Describe the situation and write briefly about how it made you feel.
2. After the shooting, Jefferson cannot remember anything from his activities that day. Do you find this statement believable? Describe a time when you were so stunned that you were unable to think or move at all.

Chapter 2

3. Grant says that when he gets home from school, he avoids speaking to Miss Emma because he is afraid to face her. Have you ever had a hard time speaking to someone who has just received bad news? What would you say to Grant if you were his aunt?
4. Grant hates his job and the area in which he lives. He wishes his aunt would acknowledge his unhappiness. Have you ever been unhappy with your home or with the work you have to do? Describe a time when you wished you could be somewhere else. How did other people react?

A Lesson Before Dying

34. To hurt Grant, Jefferson insults Vivian. Write a letter from Vivian to either Grant or Jefferson that demonstrates how you feel about Jefferson's actions.

Chapter 18

35. Grant tells Jefferson that only human beings worry. List five things you worry about. Do you think other people worry about the same things you do?
36. Grant confesses to Vivian that he does not think his visits to Jefferson are making any difference. Write a letter from Jefferson to Grant, from Miss Emma or from Vivian explaining how Grant really is making a difference.

Chapter 19

37. After Grant tells his students that the Christmas program is dedicated to Jefferson, the whole town turns out for the program. Explain to a classmate who doesn't understand how and why a community can rally around one individual.
38. Grant knows all of the people in the audience. He knows their stories and their emotions. Would you want to act on stage in front of other people? Write down at least ten reasons why you would and ten why you wouldn't.

Chapter 25

49. Grant goes back to the Rainbow to wait for Vivian because he wants to tell her his news first. If you heard some very good news, who is the first person you would tell? Why? Who is the last person you would tell? Why?
50. Grant tells himself that he should not let the bricklayers' insulting talk ruin his good day. Imagine that you have a wonderful day and that someone tries to pick a fight with you. Write the conversation you might have. Your dialogue might begin as follows:

You: Nothing can spoil my day today.

Other person: Everyone has been talking behind your back, you know.

You: That...

Chapter 26

56. Grant says he could not help fighting the bricklayer, but Vivian says he could. Would you agree with Grant or Vivian? Write a few paragraphs in which you try to convince your best friend, who is also reading this novel, of your opinion.
57. Grant asks Vivian what everyone wants from him. Make a list of five things you think people want from you. Then, write down the name of a friend or a family member and list five things people want from him or her. Compare the two lists, and come up with some conclusions about the expectations or wants people have.

W r a p - U p

63. Jefferson is in the wrong place at the wrong time; he does not intend to kill Mr. Gropè. The jury believes, however, that he deserves to die. What do you think is wrong with the legal system as it is portrayed in this book? Are the same things wrong today?
64. Would you recommend this book to a friend? Would you recommend it to an adult? Why or why not?
65. Paul and Grant become friends in spite of racial barriers. Why are racial barriers so hard to overcome? Explain three things that would help overcome these barriers.
66. The ending of this story could be considered sad. Can you think of a better ending, or do you think this is a good ending because it is appropriate?
67. What do you think of the title of the story? Did you understand its significance? What might be a better title?
68. If you were to tell a friend what you think the message of this novel is, what would it be?
69. When you read the last page of this novel, what were your thoughts and feelings?