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A Lesson Before Dying
BY ERNEST J. GAINES



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Pre-Reading**Research and Context**

Objective: Researching the events of 1948 to provide an historical context for *A Lesson Before Dying*

Activity

Note to the Teacher: Answers may vary in terms of inclusion, but should include many of the following sample answers. This activity will work for small groups or individuals.

The events in *A Lesson Before Dying* take place in 1948. Having some knowledge of what was going on in the world politically and culturally will provide a deeper historical context while reading. Use the Internet, an encyclopedia, or some other reference source to thoroughly fill in the following chart. One cultural event has been provided for you as an example. You must make at least four entries in each column.

Chapters 1 – End

Plot and Tone

Objectives: Identifying significant incidents in the plot
Identifying tone

Activity

Note to the Teacher: Answers will vary. Some possibilities are presented.

Author Ernest J. Gaines has chosen to simply number the chapters of *A Lesson Before Dying* rather than titling them. In novels with chapter titles, the titles frequently provide an overview of a chapter's content or point towards a significant incident or character. Chapter 1 of *A Lesson Before Dying*, for example, might have been entitled "The Trial" or "A Boy's Fate."

On the other hand, a chapter might take its title from part of the dialogue or descriptive prose in the chapter—or even from a significant word that sums up the overall tone of the installment. In this case, Chapter 1 might be called "Hog" or "A Fool Stood By."

As you read *A Lesson Before Dying*, pause after each chapter to consider possible titles. Fill in the chart below by writing one "plot-related" title and one prose or "tone-related" title per chapter.

Chapters 10 – 11

Letter of Advice

Objective: Objectively counseling the character

Activity

Grant becomes angry when he realizes that Tante Lou and Miss Emma expect him to visit Jefferson alone. He feels humiliated about performing these duties, and Miss Emma apologizes. She tells him that she has no one else who can help her. When Grant gets to the cell, he is unsure of what to say.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

“You brought some corn?” he said

“Corn?”

“That’s what hogs eat,” he said...

He knelt down on the floor and put his head inside the bag and started eating, without using his hands. He even sounded like a hog...

“Are you trying to make me feel guilty for your being here? You don’t want me to come back here anymore?...”

I could not think of anything else to say to him... The rest of the hour just dragged along. (Pg. 82-84)

Grant decides to tell Miss Emma that Jefferson enjoyed her food, just to make her happy. Grant is uncomfortable with Jefferson’s situation and is not sure how to act. Have Grant write a letter to an advice columnist asking for advice on how to handle the situation. Be sure to answer Grant’s letter.

Chapter 18

Critical Thinking

Objective: Making a list of “moral obligations” versus “legal obligations”

Activity

Note to the Teacher: This activity may be completed by groups, pairs, or individuals, according to your preference. Ask for volunteers to share their answers, perhaps recording them in two lists on the board.

“No matter how bad off we are,” Grant tells Jefferson in this chapter, “we still owe something.” (Pg. 139) In other words, according to Grant, we all have moral obligations as well as legal ones. It may be fairly easy to rattle off a list of your current legal obligations; perhaps the one you feel most prominently is your obligation to attend school. But what are your moral obligations? Do you feel that you “owe” your parents or friends certain things? How about your community or the world?

Make two lists below: one of your current legal obligations, and one of your moral obligations—both those you currently feel and those you expect to have or accrue throughout your lifetime. You should have at least six items per list.

Chapters 26 – 27

Debate

Objective: Constructing arguments towards and participating in a debate

Activity

Note to the Teacher: Below are four possible topics for debate. If your class has around thirty students, break them into groups of approximately four. If you have fewer, consider using groups of two or forgoing one of the suggested topics. You might want to consider creating an additional topic for debate or allowing students to choose their own.

A Lesson Before Dying delves into a number of hot-button issues concerning civil rights and racism in America. Some of the issues remain as entrenched in debate today as they were at the time in which the novel is set, and other related issues have emerged over the decades.

Each team will be assigned one of the following topics and positions to argue in a formal debate. In constructing your argument, you may choose to conduct research on your topic by using the library, the Internet, or another available source. If you feel you can build a strong enough argument without research, by appealing to your audience on an emotional or purely logical level, you may take that approach.

Debates shall be conducted in the following format:

- Position A gives opening argument. (3 minutes)
- Position B gives opening argument. (3 minutes)
- Position A makes rebuttal. (2 minutes)
- Position B makes rebuttal. (2 minutes)
- Position A makes closing statement. (1 minute)
- Position B makes closing statement (1 minute)

At the conclusion of each debate, your fellow class members will vote as to which side argued its position more effectively. *NOTE: Do not automatically vote for the team whose position you agree with. Rather, concentrate on how well teams presented their arguments and responded to those of the opposition.*