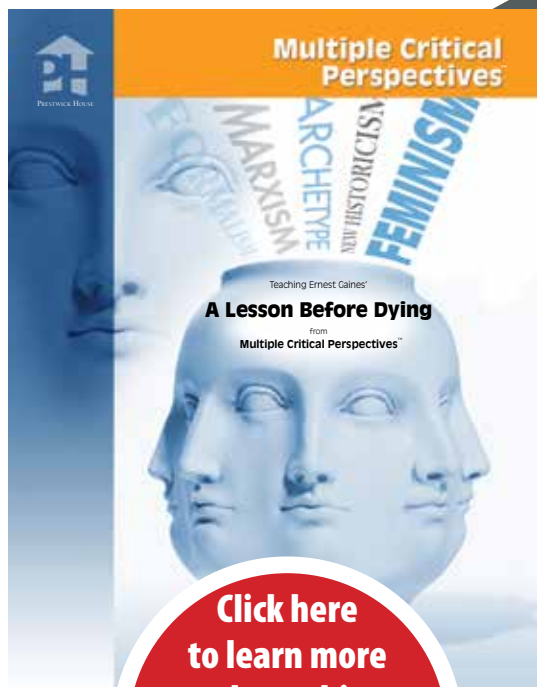




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Teaching Ernest Gaines'

A Lesson Before Dying

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *A Lesson Before Dying*

A *LESSON BEFORE DYING*, written by Ernest J. Gaines (b. 1933), is a novel about finding the grace, dignity and strength to walk like a man despite terrible odds. The story treads geographic and philosophical territory that will be familiar to Gaines's readers. Like most of Gaines's earlier works, *A Lesson Before Dying* takes place in the fictional Bayonne, a richly drawn, small, segregated Southern community based on the author's boyhood home near New Roads in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana. The year is 1948, and in this work, as in other Gaines novels, African-American characters strive to prove their humanity in a white world that legally and culturally denies it. The story turns on a single, freighted word—hog—as the godmother of a black man convicted and sentenced to die for a murder which he claims he did not commit vows to see him walk to his death “like a man.”

The main characters accept the fate of Jefferson, a simple-minded field hand who is the sole survivor of a liquor store robbery turned deadly, with a resignation that may seem both horrifying and inexplicable to modern readers. Instead of fighting his conviction and impending execution, the characters set out to prove that he is not the dumb beast that his defense attorney portrayed at trial.

To this end, the godmother, Miss Emma, implores a reluctant Grant Wiggins, the proud, college-educated plantation schoolteacher, to teach Jefferson how to be a man. When Miss Emma says, “I don't want them to kill no hog. I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet,” she is speaking for the entire community. Jefferson comes to represent all the black men and women of the plantation quarter, who though no longer slaves, are enslaved by Jim Crow laws and the patronizing attitudes of white society. Likewise, Grant, who wrestles with his desire to flee the South, must learn through Jefferson what it means to be a man.

A master of the first-person point of view, Gaines tells the story through the eyes of the arrogant and judgmental Grant, who is equally harsh with himself, his students and the people whom he professes to love. Self-aware and contradictory, Grant injects an ironic tone into the narrative that lends a complexity to the novel and makes the story and its characters altogether real. Gaines, while morally clear, is never preachy or didactic. He seamlessly weaves his themes of survival with dignity, redemption, and the search for manhood throughout the novel, proving once again that the best storytelling is accomplished not by telling, but by showing.

In a 2007 interview with Dan Stone of the National Endowment for the Arts, Gaines talked about his inspiration for *A Lesson Before Dying*, selected that year as an NEA Big Read book.

Gaines said he began contemplating a story about execution when he lived in San Francisco, across the bay from the San Quentin prison. Thinking about the executions, which occurred there at 10 a.m. on Tuesdays, gave him nightmares, Gaines said.

New Historicism Applied to *A Lesson Before Dying*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.

Activity One

Using Examples from the Text to Discern the Effect of Segregationist Laws on African-Americans

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Lesson Before Dying*: New Historicism—Activity One—Group Questions.
2. Copy and distribute the supplemental information. Instruct the students to keep the fact sheets for use in future exercises.
 - Timeline, 1863-1965.
 - Jim Crow and Civil Rights, 1863-1965.
 - 13th, 14th, 15th, & 24th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.
 - Ernest J. Gaines biography
3. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
4. Ask each group to read its assigned passages before answering a series of questions common to the three topics.
5. Reconvene the class and ask a representative of each group to present its answers.
6. As a class, explore and discuss the final questions below.
 - Does the novel represent the view of the culture of power or of the oppressed culture? How is the viewpoint significant?
 - How might the passages have been different if they represented the other view?

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *A Lesson Before Dying*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (ALSO “PSYCHOANALYTICAL” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Using Examples from the Text to Discern the Impact of Racial Segregation on the Black Male Ego in the Pre-Civil Rights Era South

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Lesson Before Dying*: Psychoanalytic Theory Activity One—Group Questions.
2. Copy and distribute the supplements from the New Historicist section: Ernest J. Gaines Biography and Jim Crow and Civil Rights, 1865-1965.
3. Discuss as a class the intent and parameters of the Psychoanalytic Theory. Guide the students through the main areas of study and points of criticism as outlined in the Notes on Psychoanalytic Theory, giving particular emphasis to the second view with its focus on author bias and the influence of the author's experience on his viewpoints and work. Emphasize the concepts of id, superego and ego for students who may be encountering these concepts for the first time.
4. Have the entire class read the selected passages in Group A and answer the questions individually. Familiarity with the passages in Group A is necessary for a full appreciation of the passages in Groups B and C.
5. Divide the class into an even number of groups.
6. Assign to each group, or allow each to choose, either Group B or Group C questions.
7. Have each group read its assigned passages before answering a series of questions.

As an alternative, you may want to assign the class to read all of the passages in advance before dividing into discussion groups to answer the questions.

8. Reconvene the class and have each group present its findings.
9. As a class, explore and discuss these final questions:
 - What is the author saying about the pressures on African-American males in a segregated society?
 - Does the author indicate a preference for the ways in which African-American males responded to segregation and oppression?

Feminist Theory Applied to *A Lesson Before Dying*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

Feminism is an evolving philosophy, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Using Examples from the Text to Determine Whether the Characters are Stereotypical or Realistic

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Lesson Before Dying*: Feminist Theory Activity One—Selected Readings.
2. Copy and distribute the supplemental material: African-American Women in Literature, Film, and Marketing.
3. Divide the class into two groups. Both groups should read all the selections before answering the questions.

Note: You may wish to assign the reading before class to allow maximum time for group discussion.

4. Assign each group one of the theses below to be supported with examples from the text. The groups should use the entire novel, as well as the selected passages, to make their points. They should identify specific character traits and descriptions within the text as either stereotypical or realistic.

Note: If students disagree with their group's thesis, have them find examples to support their disagreement.

Theses:

- The female characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* are realistic and complex with dynamic motives and contributions of their own.
 - The female characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* are stereotypical and serve primarily to advance the plot and/or support the male characters.
5. Reconvene the class and have each group share its findings.
 6. Discuss the final questions as a class:
 - Overall, are these female characters believable?
 - Do stereotypes exist because they are essentially true?