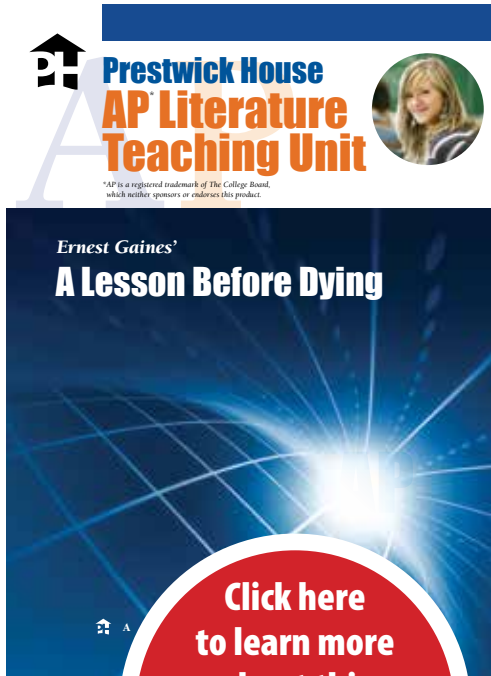




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**Teaching Unit**

**A Lesson Before Dying**

by Ernest J. Gaines

written by Diana Drew



**Prestwick House**

Item No. 303453

# A Lesson Before Dying

## Objectives

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

1. recognize how setting, mood, and tone complement the themes of the novel.
2. understand how biblical allusions resonate with the plot and characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*.
3. identify allusions to well-known contemporaries of the characters in the novel and analyze their relationship to the themes of the novel.
4. evaluate the effectiveness of the first-person narration and the narrative device of incorporating other characters' voices.
5. analyze how the social and racial stratification in 1948 Louisiana affects the lives of the characters.
6. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. offer a close reading of *A Lesson Before Dying* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

## Introductory Lecture

### HISTORICAL SETTING

**The Segregated South:** *A Lesson Before Dying* takes place in Louisiana in the late 1940s. At that time, segregation was the law of the land in the southern states, including Louisiana. This meant that, by law, blacks and whites had separate public accommodations, from public schools and churches to restaurants, taverns, hotels, and drinking fountains. In places of employment and public buildings (such as the courthouse in *A Lesson Before Dying*), blacks and whites had to use separate entrances and separate bathrooms; undertakers had to provide separate hearses for blacks and whites; separate graveyards were mandated by law; and in some states blacks were denied access to public parks. Blacks and whites lived in separate neighborhoods (such as the “quarter” in *A Lesson Before Dying*). Marriage between blacks and whites was prohibited. Voting rights were also restricted for blacks. These segregationist laws were known as “Jim Crow” laws.

Sixteen southern states were responsible for 79 percent of the segregationist laws in the country. Louisiana had twenty-nine individual segregationist laws in force. The other southern states where segregation was the law of the land were Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Although blacks in the South enjoyed equal rights immediately after the Civil War, with the end of Reconstruction in 1876, Southern states began reinstating segregationist laws. The Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) codified segregation with its ruling that “separate but equal” did not violate the rights of African-Americans.

A later Supreme Court overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine in 1954 with the decision in *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, ending legal racial discrimination in public education.

From the time of slavery (outlawed in 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln, when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, during the Civil War) through the 1940s, the Ku Klux Klan exerted a strong influence in the South, holding rallies, burning crosses, dragging black families out of their homes, and murdering blacks. Very few Klansmen were ever arrested or punished for their crimes.

Segregation exerted unspoken rules of social convention that stunted the humanity of both blacks and whites. In that context, seeing oneself as human—the point of Miss Emma’s pushing Grant Wiggins to visit her godson in prison in *A Lesson Before Dying*—becomes a form of heroism.

As shown in the novel, individuals sometimes managed to circumvent unspoken rules and undermine the power of social convention. For instance, Miss Emma prevails on Henri Pichot to speak to his brother-in-law, the sheriff, to arrange for Grant Wiggins to visit Jefferson in prison. She uses as leverage everything she has done for the family over the years in running their household. Even though Pichot is uncomfortable about this request, he nonetheless feels compelled to accede to it.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does the courtroom scene in Chapter 1 exemplify the social and racial stratification in 1948 Louisiana?
2. What is the significance of the narrator's position as a teacher—a black man with a college education—in light of what Miss Emma asks him to do?
3. Like a Greek tragedy, the plot of *A Lesson Before Dying* moves to an inescapable conclusion. Yet a subtle shift occurs toward the end that elevates Jefferson, as well as Grant Wiggins, making both of them heroic, though flawed, characters. Describe each of these shifts, citing specific events that prompt them and explain what these shifts mean to Jefferson and Grant.
4. Food is laden with meaning throughout *A Lesson Before Dying*. Explain the meaning of food to Tante Lou and Miss Emma. Touch on the difference in how food is viewed by men and women in the novel.
5. The narrator draws an analogy between the students he is trying to teach in the plantation church school and the lesson he has been asked to teach Jefferson before he is executed. Explain what underlies these two types of lessons and why the narrator finds it such an uphill battle to get through to his students.
6. Cite specific examples from *A Lesson Before Dying* in which the “system” dehumanized and emasculated male characters. Then point out how Grant, Jefferson, and Reverend Ambrose manage to express their humanity despite the oppression imposed by segregation.
7. What does the word *hog* mean to the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*? Explain how the public defender's comparison of Jefferson to a hog in Chapter 1 affects Jefferson, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Grant. Also delve into what the sheriff means when he refers to Jefferson as a hog in Chapter 6 (speaking of him as either a “contented hog” or an “aggravated hog”) and why it is so unsettling when Jefferson himself acts like a hog in Chapter 11.
8. Much is left unspoken and unsaid in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Citing specific examples of this literary technique, explain how reality is inferred by the characters and why so much needs to be left unsaid.

# A Lesson Before Dying

## Chapter 1

1. Explore the significance of the opening sentence. Consider the manner in which the sentence introduces a central theme of the novel—the search for manhood. “I was not there, yet I was there.”

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2. Compare and contrast how the prosecutor’s argument differs from the public defender’s argument.

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3. From whose perspective is the story of the robbery and shooting told? Is this story presented as fact or as a subjective account?

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## Chapter 2

1. Why does Miss Emma want Grant to visit Jefferson in prison?

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2. When Miss Emma first speaks to Grant after the verdict and sentencing, the narrator observes that “The pain I saw in that face came from many years past.” What does the narrator mean by that?

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**Chapter 8**

1. The story the narrator recounts of the mulatto teacher, Matthew Antoine, exudes a strong tone of futility. How does this dovetail with the overall tone of the book?

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2. How does Matthew Antoine’s experience mirror the narrator’s? How is it different?

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3. And how does Matthew’s experience echo that of the mulattos in Chapter 25?

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4. How does Matthew contribute to the overall theme of the novel?

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**Chapter 21**

1. According to the narrator, how does Jefferson’s plight exemplify the plight of black men in the segregated South?

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2. How does Jefferson have it within his power to break the vicious circle the narrator describes to Vivian in this chapter?

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**Chapter 22**

1. What prompts this change in Jefferson’s attitude and how does Grant respond to the change?

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2. Explain how the author uses Jefferson’s response to conversation about two mundane things—a gallon of ice cream and a radio program—to develop a key theme of the novel, man’s expression of humanity.

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3. How is the discussion about the radio significant to the rising action of the novel?

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## Chapter 24

1. The narrator observes that Miss Emma did not feel the same way about Grant's mission as Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose did. Explain how Miss Emma's feelings about Grant's mission differ from Tante Lou's and Reverend Ambrose's missions.

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2. The narrator notes that he did not want to look at Miss Emma too long because "I knew what I would find in her face, and I didn't want to see it." To what is he referring?

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3. As Jefferson and Grant walk around the dayroom, Grant appeals to Jefferson to be a hero and to chip away at the myth that underlies racial stratification in the segregated South. Summarize the argument Grant makes in urging Jefferson to exemplify dignity, identity, love, and humanity.

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4. In what ways does the exchange between Jefferson and Grant at the prison bring the novel to a climax? Identify specific points in the conversation that mark key turning points for both Grant and Jefferson.

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## Chapter 25

1. When the narrator describes the mulattos, he keeps repeating that they went out of their way not to work "side by side with the niggers." What is the impact of this repetition?

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**Chapter 31**

1. How do the black people in the quarter show their respect to Jefferson on the day of his execution?

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2. What does Jefferson mean by his last words: "Tell Nannan I walked"?

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3. What does Grant's decision not to attend Jefferson's execution reveal about the development of his character?

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4. When Grant says, "I am a slave," what does he mean?

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5. How does the last exchange, between Grant and Paul, after they shake hands, reflect the overall theme of the novel?

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