



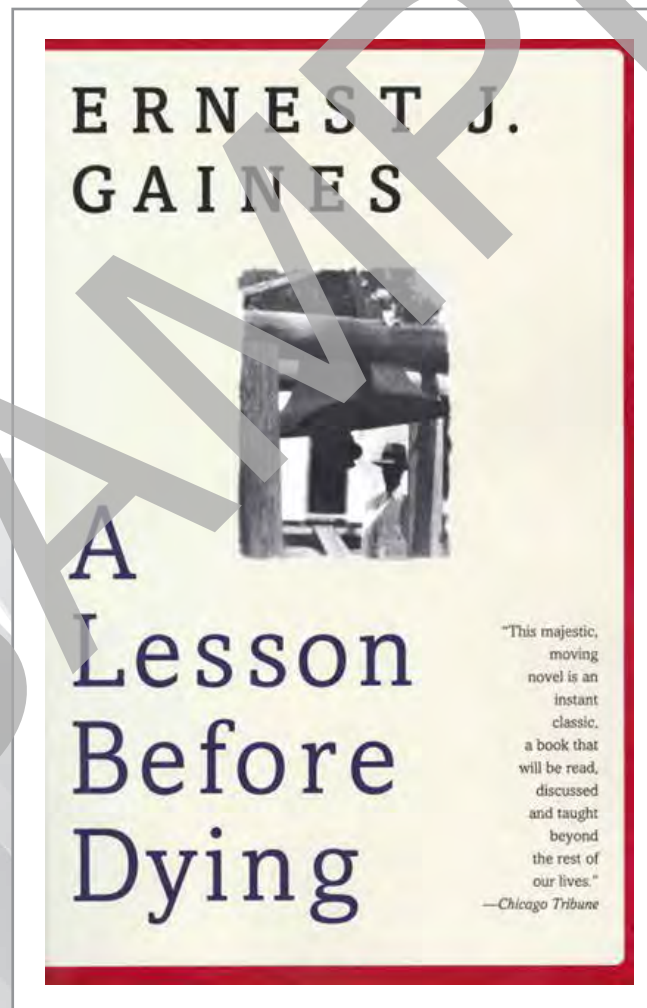
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

A Lesson Before Dying

Ernest J. Gaines



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

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TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Table of Contents

Summary.....	3
Background Information.....	4
About the Author.....	5
Initiating Activities.....	6
Thirty-one Chapters.....	12
Each section contains: Summary, Vocabulary, Discussion Questions, and Supplementary Activities	
Post-reading Discussion Questions.....	28
Post-reading Extension Activities.....	30
Assessment.....	32
Glossary.....	33

Skills and Strategies

Thinking

Research, compare/contrast,
analysis, brainstorming,
critical thinking

Writing

Critique, poetry, script,
sequel, letter, summary

Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,
application

Across the Curriculum

Art—drawing, caricature,
collage

Literary Elements

Characterization, irony,
simile, metaphor, allusion,
symbolism, dialect, theme,
universality

Comprehension

Predicting, cause/effect,
inference

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, oral reading,
interview, poetry reading,
film viewing, oral report,
music, drama

Genre: fiction

Point of View: first person with the exception of Chapter 29 (diary entries) and Chapter 30 (third-person omniscient)

Style: narrative

Setting: Louisiana: plantation in St. Raphael parish and Bayonne; late 1940s

Themes: human dignity, racial inequality, love, redemption

Conflict: man vs. racism; man vs. self; man vs. man

Tone: pessimism; in last chapter changes to hopeful

Summary

Jefferson, a young black man, unwittingly participates in an attempted robbery that evolves into murder. He is wrongfully convicted of the crime and is sentenced to die. After hearing the defense attorney call Jefferson a "hog," his godmother, Miss Emma, persuades Grant Wiggins, teacher at the plantation school, to visit Jefferson and help him gain the pride and dignity to die like a man. Jefferson and Wiggins form a close bond as they both learn important lessons in human dignity and heroism.

Primary Characters

Jefferson: twenty-one-year-old black man facing death in the electric chair for a murder he did not commit

Grant Wiggins: black man who left the plantation to go to college and returns to teach in the plantation school; struggles with inner conflict: whether to remain on the plantation or seek a better life away from the bigotry of the South; is persuaded to visit Jefferson and try to instill pride and dignity in him before he dies

Miss Emma: Jefferson's elderly godmother (nannan) who has raised him; formerly cooked for and ran the household of the Pichots, owners of the plantation

Tante Lou: Grant's elderly aunt with whom he lives and whose sacrifices enabled Grant to attend college; assists Miss Emma in persuading Grant to visit Jefferson

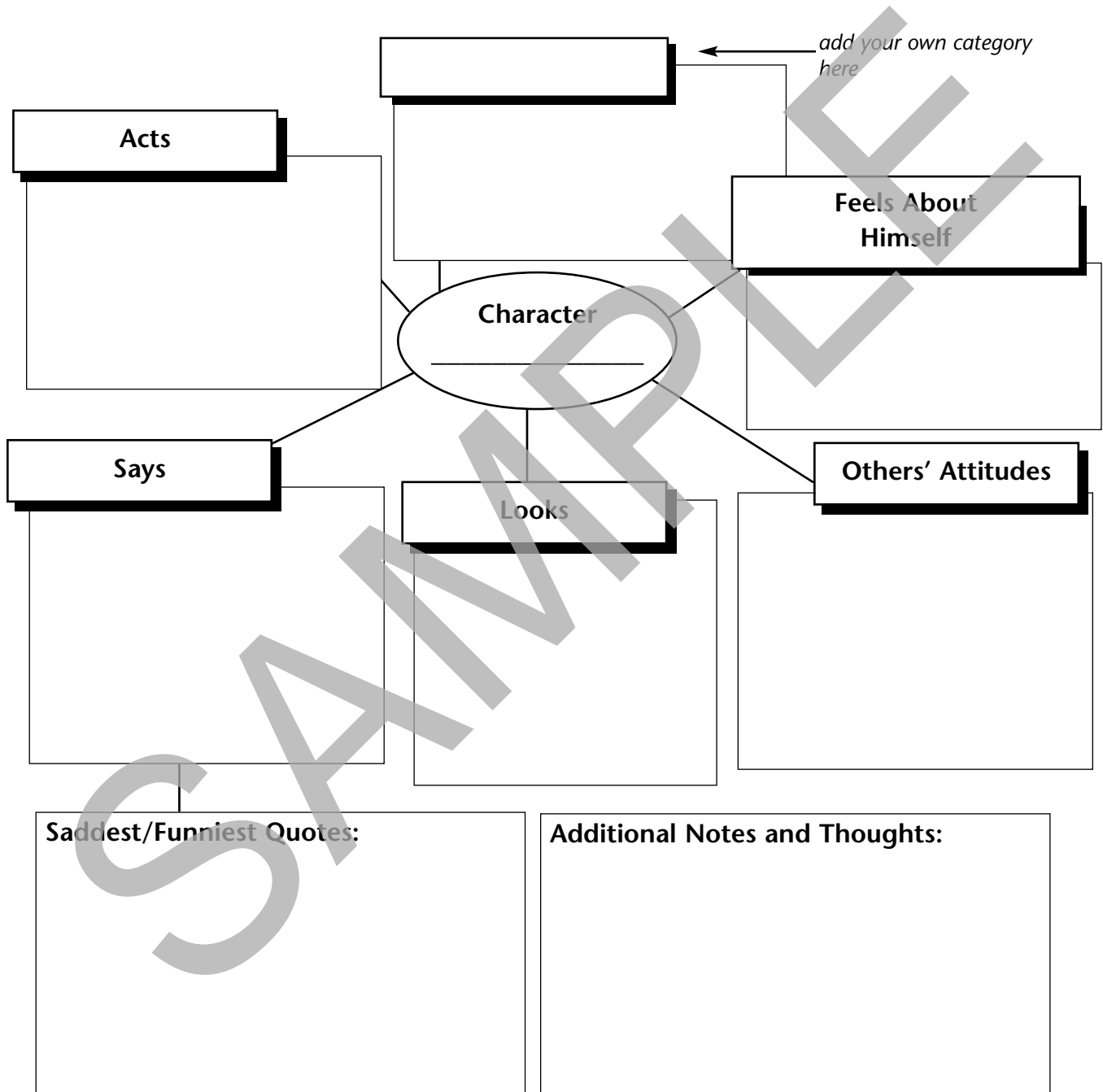
Vivian Baptiste: beautiful, light-colored black woman whom Grant loves; not yet divorced, she cannot leave Bayonne because of concern for her children

Reverend Mose Ambrose: preacher; more concerned about Jefferson's soul than his dignity

Henri Pichot: manager of the plantation

Attribute Web

Directions: Create an attribute web for Jefferson and Grant Wiggins. As you read, feel free to add more categories of your own, additional notes, etc.



Chapters 1-2, pp. 3-15

Jefferson, a young black man, is wrongfully convicted of murder and is sentenced to death. The defense attorney calls him a “hog,” and his godmother wants Grant Wiggins, teacher at the school for black children, to visit Jefferson in jail and teach him to be a man and to die with dignity.

Vocabulary

godmother (3)
illegible (11)

conspiracy (7)
plantation (12)

modicum (7)
parain (12)

quarter (10)

Discussion Questions

1. Read aloud and analyze the first sentence. Discuss the opening paragraph: what the reader learns about the narrator, the crime, the defendant, and the trial. (*Grant Wiggins, the narrator, vicariously attends the trial through the eyes and ears of his aunt. He observes the immobile posture of grief of the defendant's godmother; he hears arguments of the prosecuting and defense attorneys; he learns how the crime was committed and why the defendant, Jefferson, was at the crime scene. Grant senses the hopelessness of the trial as everyone knows what the outcome will be. Someone must pay for the death of a white man who was killed during a robbery. Jefferson was captured at the scene of the crime and, although he is innocent of the murder, he will be sentenced to death. pp. 4-5*)
2. Discuss what happened prior to the courtroom scene. Contrast Jefferson's story with that of the prosecutor. (*Jefferson: Two black men, Brother and Bear, offered him a ride, asked if he had any money, then decided to go to Mr. Gropé's store and ask for liquor on credit. Gropé refused to let them have the liquor without money, they attempted to take it anyway, and Gropé grabbed a gun from the cash register and began shooting. Brother also began firing, and when the shooting ceased, the two black men and the storekeeper were all on the floor. Jefferson realized Gropé was still alive and began to beg him to tell the authorities that he had nothing to do with the fight, but Gropé died. Jefferson grabbed some money from the cash register and started to run, but two white men entered the store and captured him. The prosecutor: The three men had gone to Gropé's store intending to rob the old man, then kill him so he could not identify them. Jefferson's callousness in taking the money after all three men were dead, then celebrating the event by drinking, proved him to be an animal. pp. 4-7*)
3. Examine the derogatory statements by Jefferson's defense lawyer and what this reveals about the attorney. (*He tells the jury Jefferson is not a man but a boy and a fool with no intelligence. He asks the jury to note the shape of Jefferson's skull, the face as flat as the palm of his hand, and the eyes lacking any intelligence. He refers to Jefferson as an animal who could never have planned a robbery or a murder because he is incapable of planning, and stresses that he can only strike out in fear as did his ancestors in the deepest jungle of Africa. The lawyer's comments reveal his own bigotry and his belief that all whites are superior to all blacks. Note that this opinion prevailed in the post-Civil War South. p. 7*)
4. Analyze the significance of the word “hog.” Discuss Miss Emma's pain and her primary concern. (*This is the one word Jefferson's godmother hears at the trial. The defense attorney stresses to the jury that he would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as “this,” stating that it is an insult to the intelligence of the jury to call Jefferson a man. Miss Emma, Jefferson's*

godmother, is deeply troubled because he has been called a “hog.” She wants Grant Wiggins to visit Jefferson and teach him to die like a man, walking on his own two feet, not being dragged like a hog. Miss Emma’s pain has come from many years of degradation by and servitude to the white owners of the plantation, and her ultimate pain will be the death of her godson. pp. 4, 8, 12-14)

5. Analyze the significance of the statement, “He’s (Jefferson) dead now. And I can’t raise the dead.” (Wiggins does not believe that he or anyone else can do anything to help Jefferson now, that the death sentence will never be reversed, and that asking him to visit Jefferson and help him learn to die with dignity will be like trying to raise the dead. Wiggins’ only hope is to keep others from ending up like Jefferson. p. 14)
6. **Prediction:** What will happen at the Pichot Plantation?

Supplementary Activities

1. Note the jury of 12 white men. Have students research the right to serve on a jury and the voting rights of African Americans in the South during the 1940s.
2. Ask for a student volunteer to sketch Jefferson and/or the jury at the trial.
3. As a class, write a five-senses poem (e.g., Hopelessness or Despair) that depicts Jefferson’s emotions.
4. Note the literary devices: **Similes**—his godmother became as immobile as a great stone or as one of our oak or cypress stumps (p. 3); whiskey burned him like fire (p. 6); face as flat as palm of hand (p. 7) **Metaphor**—Jefferson: cornered animal (p. 7)

Chapters 3-4, pp. 16-32

Miss Emma and Grant’s aunt seek help from Henri Pichot for permission for Grant to visit Jefferson. Grant seeks comfort and advice from Vivian, the lady whom he plans to marry.

Vocabulary

antebellum (17) parish (25)

Discussion Questions

1. Analyze the symbolism of entering the Pichot house through the back door. Note other signs of racism. (*Entering by the back door symbolizes servanthood and reminds Grant of his childhood when he always had to enter by the back door, bring wood for the stove, catch and kill the chickens, and act subservient to the white plantation owners. Now he must enter through the back door, although he vowed when he left for college that he would never again do so. Other signs of racism: Pichot’s obvious annoyance at the presence of the black people; no one offers them a chair; Pichot’s dislike of Grant because of his education; Pichot’s expectation of Grant to address him as “Sir” and for Grant to lower his eyes after Pichot finishes speaking to him. pp. 17-21*)