



 Prestwick House

# Activity Pack

## A LESSON BEFORE DYING

BY ERNEST J. GAINES



Copyright © 2004 by Prestwick House, Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938. 1-800-932-4593. [www.prestwickhouse.com](http://www.prestwickhouse.com) Permission to use this unit for classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her personal use. This material, in whole or part, may not be copied for resale. Revised January 2016.

ISBN 978-1-60389-259-9

Item No. 201588

Written by Emily Lloyd & Sondra Abel

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Pre-Reading****Research and Context**

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

**Activity**

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.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Chapter 1

### Newspaper

**Objective:** Creating a one-page newspaper covering the trial

#### Activity

With your group, create a one-page newspaper that might come out as an “extra” edition in the evening following Jefferson’s trial. Give your paper a name and make sure it includes:

1. One straight **news story** covering the details of Jefferson’s case, the arguments of the prosecution and the defense, the jury’s verdict, and other pertinent information. A news story does not offer an opinion on the matter at hand; it merely relates, as objectively as possible, what happened. Remember to give your news story a catchy headline that will draw readers in without giving everything away. Headlines are generally short, so convey your message in less than eight words.
2. One **editorial** critiquing the defense’s strategy of comparing the defendant to an animal. Unlike a straight news story, an editorial contains its writer’s (or writers’) opinion on the matter at hand. (Was the defense’s strategy effective? Was it professional? Was it racist? Based on his performance at the trial, would you want to hire this defense lawyer? etc.) Editorials should be persuasive, and any opinions stated should be supported by factual details. Like a news story, an editorial should have a compelling title for a headline.
3. One **court sketch** of Jefferson as you imagine him during the trial. Cameras are not always permitted in courtrooms, but we can often get a visual sense of the proceedings from court sketches made by an artist during a trial. Re-read Chapter 1, scanning for the few details Gaines provides us on Jefferson’s appearance. Use your imagination to supply the rest. How might a teenage boy accused of such a crime look while hearing the words both lawyers use about him—and knowing that his godmother is hearing them—look? What might his posture be like? What expression might be on his face? You decide.
4. One “**wild card**” item of your choice—an editorial cartoon or a letter to the editor, for example. Make sure your “wild card” item pertains to the issues that Jefferson’s trial raises.

Be prepared to present your newspaper to the class.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Chapters 1 – End****Plot and Tone**

**Objectives:** Identifying significant incidents in the plot  
Identifying tone

**Activity**

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.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Chapters 7 – 8****Research**

**Objectives:**    Researching educational conditions  
                         Writing a comparison

**Activity**

Grant has been waiting for the superintendent, Dr. Joseph Morgan, to arrive. When Dr. Morgan arrives he inspects the students like a master would inspect slaves. Grant complains to the superintendent about the poor conditions, telling him that they receive hand-me-downs from white schools.

What kind of school do you attend? There are vast differences among schools across the country, even today. Using the list below, research your school and compare it to another school in your district or state, or compare it to a school in different state or country. You may have to use the Internet or talk to a teacher to answer some of the following questions. Feel free to create some of your own questions for comparison. You do not have to answer all of these questions, but be sure that the comparison is at least one page long.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Chapter 9

### Found Poems

**Objective:** Composing a “found” poem

#### Activity

A “found” poem is a poem made up entirely of phrases or quotations found in another text. Found poems can be constructed from anything. Your assignment is to create a poem from phrases you find in Chapter 9.

As you read this chapter, take note of any words or phrases that you find intriguing, striking, or particularly resonant. When you are ready, arrange them on separate lines in a way that appeals to you. Remember, new ideas or images can be created when unlike phrases are juxtaposed. Line breaks can be used to great effect, so experiment with breaking lines in different places before you decide on final positions. Your poem can be in free verse or in rhyme. The poem must be at least twelve lines long.

Play around with and separate Gaines’ words as much as you like, but do not deviate from them—part of the fun of this exercise is in creating something “new” from something that was already there. Below, to serve as an example, is the beginning of a found poem made up of words and phrases from Chapter 8.

Picking up chips and stacking wood,  
Exactly as the old men did—  
Picking up chips and stacking wood:  
Is it just a vicious circle?

Wood for winter—  
I’ll still be cold.  
Some wine, two glasses—  
I’ll still be cold...

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**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.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Chapter 13

### Poem

**Objective:** Writing a poem about your beliefs

#### Activity

Miss Emma attends Determination Sunday at church, an activity in which members sing their favorite hymns and tell the congregation where they will spend eternity. Grant does not share her devotion, having told her that he doesn't believe anymore and doesn't want her to force religion on him.

Grant can hear the congregation singing at the church. He ponders about when he lost his faith and how he feels about God and the Bible now. He became distant from church while he was at the university, since studying took up most of his time.

Have you struggled with your beliefs? Are your ideas different from your parents', friends', or relatives'? How strong and influential are your beliefs? Write a poem about what you believe in. Be sure to include any changes you have gone through and any conflicts you may have had regarding your beliefs. Your beliefs do not have to be of a particular religion; rather they can take the form of a principle or general concept on how to live your life and how to treat others. Your poem must be at least twelve lines long.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Chapters 14 – 15****Characterization****Objective:** Keeping a character log on Vivian**Activity**

In the next few chapters, more and more is revealed about Vivian from Grant's observations, Vivian's actions, and Vivian's own words. As you read, keep a character log on Vivian. In the left column, note her significant or interesting actions or speeches, as well as any insightful observations Grant makes about her. In the right column, comment on what each entry in the left one tells you about Vivian's character. Quote directly from the book and record the page numbers.

You should make a minimum of four log entries per chapter. Continue your log on the back of this page if necessary. One sample log entry (from Chapter 4) is provided for you below.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Chapter 18****Critical Thinking**

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

**Activity**

“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.