

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Lesson Before Dying

by Ernest J. Gaines

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Objectives

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

1. define literary terms and be able to cite examples of them from *A Lesson Before Dying*.
2. define important vocabulary words used in the novel.
3. identify and trace the development of the main themes of the novel.
4. identify the point of view of the storyteller and discuss the effect of the author's use of this particular point of view.
5. pick out significant events, scenes, or speeches and explain their significance to the novel as a whole.
6. identify the important conflicts which lead to the climax.
7. explain how the author resolves (or does not resolve) the various conflicts brought up during the course of the plot.
8. discuss how the setting influences the ways in which the action occurs.
9. trace the development of the major relationships in the novel.
10. recognize several important quotes and explain their importance to the general understanding of the novel.
11. discuss the importance of the supporting characters to the success of the plot.
12. trace the growth and development of the main character.

Note: The novel contains the word "nigger" and infrequent profanity, which may be offensive to some students. *A Lesson Before Dying* also contains one short scene depicting love-making.

All references come from the Vintage Contemporaries edition of *A Lesson Before Dying*, copyright 1993.

Quotes

For each of the following quotes,

- a) identify who is speaking
- b) identify to whom the speaker is speaking

1. “What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to lead your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn.”
 - a. *Jefferson’s defense lawyer*
 - b. *He is making his closing statement before the jury.*
2. “I don’t want them to kill no hog,” she said, “I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet.”
 - a. *Miss Emma*
 - b. *She is speaking to Grant, although Tante Lou is also present in this scene.*
3. “I want the teacher talk to my boy for me.”
 - a. *Miss Emma*
 - b. *She is talking to Henri Pichot when she asks him to use his influence with the sheriff and convince him to let Grant visit Jefferson on a regular basis.*
4. “After the divorce, I’ll do whatever you want me to do—as long as you’re responsible for what you do.”
 - a. *Vivian*
 - b. *She is telling Grant that she will agree to leave this town and go wherever he wants to go, but not until her divorce is final, and she has the freedom to leave with her children.*
5. “He say it be all right if you come up by five this evening.”
 - a. *Mr. Farrell Jarreau*
 - b. *Mr. Farrell is speaking to Grant, letting him know he has been given permission to visit with Jefferson.*
6. “To show too much intelligence would have been an insult to them. To show a lack of intelligence would have been a greater insult to me.”
 - a. *Grant*
 - b. *Grant thinks this when he is deciding how to respond to Sheriff Guidry and Pichot*

Questions for Discussion and Essay

1. Discuss the time period during which this story takes place. Do you find this time period to be realistic in terms of the action? Explain your answer.
2. Tante Lou and Irene are very important characters, both in Grant's life and to the book as a whole. Briefly describe each supporting character and discuss the influences on the main character and on the novel in general.
3. Relationships play an important role in this novel. Choose any two important relationships revealed in this book and briefly describe how each is influential in the development of each participant's personality and behavior.
4. Describe the interactions between Grant and Vivian. What do the characters seem to want from the other? How does the end of the novel resolve their relationship?
5. Describe the interactions between Grant and Jefferson. What does each character seem to want or need from the other? How does the end of the novel resolve their relationship?
6. Vivian is an influential character. Pick out two or three significant scenes in which she says or does something important to the course of the novel. Using these scenes, explain her importance to the plot.
7. Choose two or three scenes where the students Grant is in charge of say or do something that affects him and the course of the novel. Explain why their words and actions are important.
8. There are numerous references to racial prejudice in this novel. Identify two or three of these references, naming the characters involved and the result of their attitudes and actions.
9. Consider how this novel ends, not just for Grant, but for other characters, too. What one (or possibly two) thing(s) would you change if you could rewrite the story? Why would you make these specific changes? How would they influence other parts of the novel?
10. Identify the action that occurs in the novel, including the introduction, conflicts, rising action, climax, denouement, and resolution.

Chapter Two

VOCABULARY

parain – a Cajun term meaning *godfather*

1. Who is waiting for Grant when he gets home from school?

2. What did these women want from Grant and why?

3. How does Grant react to their suggestion?

4. Why does Grant end up going to Henri Pinchot's house with the women?

5. We now know who the narrator is. Why might the author chose to tell the story from the first-person point-of-view?

Chapter Seven

VOCABULARY

primer – basic coverage, introduction, briefing; in this context it is used to refer to the youngest students, those of kindergarten age.

1. Why is Grant upset by the superintendent’s visit to Grant’s school?

2. Explain the irony about Dr. Joseph is looking at the students’ mouths and teeth.

Chapter Sixteen

1. What plans are being made in the beginning of this chapter?

2. What surprising thing happens when Miss Emma and her group visit Jefferson?

3. Miss Emma is now even more upset than she had been and insists that Grant return to Jefferson's cell and continue to work with him. What reason does she give for wanting him to go back?
