

A Lesson Before Dying

Ernest Gaines

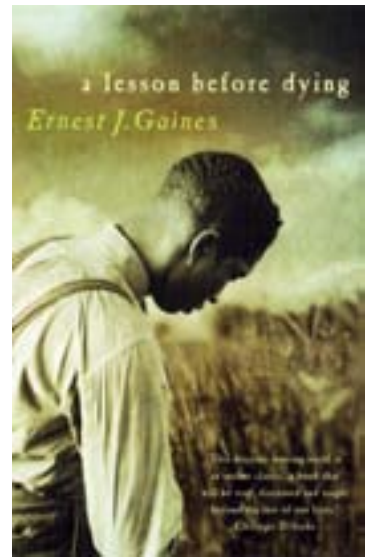
Teachers' notes written by Robyn Ewing (B.Ed Hons, PhD, University of Sydney)

Introduction

A Lesson Before Dying is an intense and moving novel. Written skilfully but economically it focuses particularly on the experiences, struggles and relationships of a small 1940s Cajun community as one of their own faces unfair conviction for armed robbery and murder and, predictably, the death sentence.

While fiction, the story provides a very accurate historical picture of black and white American race relationships in the south and life in mid twentieth century America. A number of universal themes are developed through the novel. These are intertwined and include:

- search for identity
- racial discrimination
- the difficulty of straddling two cultures
- the need for forgiveness, peace and reconciliation both on a personal and a larger scale
- the role of education in changing our lives



This novel will have significance for both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. It explores the complex cultural and societal issues prevalent in American race relationships depicted through the lives of a small community coming to terms with the hanging of an innocent man. Many of the injustices are not unknown in Australia's own history of race relations.

Brief Biographical Notes

Ernest J. Gaines is an important American writer. Born on a Louisiana plantation, he has drawn on his own life experiences working in the cane fields to paint the "Bayonne" and the black community of the novel. Currently he is a writer in residence at the University of South Western Louisiana in Lafayette.

In 1993 *A Lesson Before Dying* won the National Books Circle Award for Fiction. Gaines has also been acknowledged for his lifetime achievements in both America and France.

Before Reading the Novel

- Discuss the title and the sepia photo, which provides the front cover of the book. What does the man's body language portray? How?
- Students can explore some of the history of race relations in the United States in the twentieth century. What events were significant in the struggle for equality? This could include investigating the impact of Martin Luther King and his famous "I have a dream" address.
- It could also be valuable to discuss the white invasion of Australia and the experiences of the indigenous peoples in Australia—do they mirror/parallel what Gaines portrays in this novel? How?
- What does Thomas Jefferson symbolise in American history?

Getting into the Novel

- The novel opens with a graphic picture of the court scene and the conviction of Jefferson: *No I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be. Still I was there* (p.3). Why does Grant feel that the trial and verdict was so predictable?
- Students could depict the recount of the robbery and murder (p.4-6) as described or hotseat Jefferson about the robbery and his feelings afterwards.
- Students could build up a timeline or storymap to plot the events as they are described.

Themes

As students read the novel, they could be encouraged to identify the theme(s) they find important and examine how they are developed over time. These could be recorded in a reading log or journal with relevant page references noted. While it is not intended that every theme be discussed, those relevant or appropriate could be explored as the class reads the novel together.

Important themes include:

- Identity and cultural heritage
- Family
- Faith and Hope
- Self discovery
- Justice
- Race, social class and poverty in 20th century America
- Human dignity
- Prejudice
- Obligation and commitment
- Facing death

The lessons that Jefferson learns before his death are important lessons for everyone touched by the whole event, not least for Grant, Jefferson's embittered former teacher. Gaines reminds us that: Each of us *owes some understanding, some kind of love* (p.139).

Characterisation

- The story is narrated from Grant's perspective. How does Grant characterise himself? Students can locate explicit quotes that summarise Grant's own feelings of failure and his own ambivalence about returning to Bayonne after finishing university.
- There are a number of strong black women represented in the novel. Students can choose one to profile or they can compare Grant's aunt, Tante Lou with Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma. Both can be contrasted with Grant's lover, Vivian. In pairs, students can develop readers' theatre scripts for scenes between Grant and his aunt, Grant and Vivian, Jefferson and Miss Emma. What roles do these women play in the lives of their men?
- Similarly, Gaines paints a variety of interesting male characters. Compare Paul, the white deputy who befriends Jefferson, and the Reverend Ambrose with Grant. How are they different? Who is portrayed the most sympathetically?
- There are various friendships and relationships explored through the novel. Students could discuss how these are portrayed. Whose perspective is dominant in the novel? Whose voice is strongest? Why?
- Students could think about how particular characters are linked with particular themes. Small groups of students could focus on one particular character and develop a character-theme profile.

Setting

Place is very important in this novel. How does the author evoke a sense of this Cajun community? Students could list appropriate quotes (e.g. p.25-6,p.32,34,37-8,43,61,71) and discuss the relationship between the various settings and the themes.

Symbols

- There are many powerful symbols in the novel. Students should explore some of those they feel are most important and share their understandings of what they stand for in the novel and in their own lives. For example, what does the word 'hog' symbolise for Jefferson and his family?
- How do these symbols function to realise the author's purposes?
- Students could think about the important symbols in their own lives and discuss their relationship with their own cultural heritages.

- Re-read the analogy between people and pieces of drifting wood (p.193). Do you think it's a helpful analogy?
- Jefferson's journey and his growth in dignity is likened to a religious conversion. Why? Is this ironic given that Grant is presented as faithless?
- Jefferson is the sacrificial lamb near Easter. What other comparisons are made between Jefferson and Jesus?
- What does the gift of the radio do for Jefferson?

Style

- Students could keep a log to record the different stylistic devices and the feelings/reactions evoked with relevant page references. These could be linked to the themes.
- Gaines uses the different voices of the characters through lots of dialogue. What effect do the different dialects and registers have on the story?
- Why do you think the student's Christmas play (p 148-150) is included?
- How does the introduction of Jefferson's death-watch diary affect the reader?

Issues and questions for student discussion after reading the novel

- Revisit the title and discuss its significance. Is there a double meaning behind the word 'lesson'?
- Examine the courtroom scene. How does the language of the defence prejudice Jefferson's case?
- Does Grant's education and learning provide him with an escape from the poverty cycle?
- Why does Grant treat his students so harshly? Is he mirroring the treatment he received from his own teacher? Do you think he is right in trying to prepare the children for the reality he foresees for them?
- How does Gaines think faith has helped African Americans in their struggle for a just and equitable society?
- At the beginning of the novel, Grant is unsure about what being "a man" is. What definition(s) of humanity do you think the novel provides?
- Re-read from *Do you know what a myth is Jefferson...to I don't want them to feel safe with you anymore* (p.192). What myths does this book dispel for you as the reader?

Beyond the novel: Further Research

- The novel provides many opportunities for further research. Students could work in small groups to research one of the nominated topics, which are important to the novel and then share these with the whole class.
- Students could investigate the history of the struggle for reconciliation in America or Australia.
- It may be important for students to research their own family heritage and discover more about their backgrounds and the different traditions and understandings that inform who they are becoming.
- Students could look at the movies *To kill a mockingbird* or *Dead Man Walking* and examine the parallels.

Related Reading

To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee

Dead Man Walking, Theodore Rosengarten

Cloudstreet, Tim Winton

Rabbitproof Fence, Doris Pilkington