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A Lesson Before Dying

by

Ernest J. Gaines

1993



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Shane Strate

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Most of the story takes place in 1940's rural Louisiana, during the Jim Crow era when the South is rigidly segregated between black and white. The 'quarter', as Grant commonly refers to his neighborhood, is a community of blacks that work on a sugar cane plantation owned by.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Jefferson – A young black man who is falsely charged with murdering a white storeowner and given a death sentence.

Grant Wiggins – A plantation schoolteacher who looks to escape the racism of the South. Throughout the novel he struggles to understand what it means to be a man so that he can teach that lesson to Jefferson.

Tante Lou – Grant's aunt who raised him from a baby after his parents left Louisiana for California. She makes sure Grant follows through on his visits to Jefferson.

Miss Emma – Jefferson's Godmother. After Jefferson is convicted of murder her purpose in life is to make sure he walks to the electric chair like a man.

Reverend Ambrose – The preacher at the plantation church. He labors both to.....

Additional characters are discussed in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

The major conflict involves fatalism vs. individualism. The debate over Jefferson involves whether people can change their own nature and by doing so effect their own environment.

Protagonist - The individualist faction, which included Vivian, Tante Lou, Reverend Ambrose, believed that man is capable of determining his own destiny, that people.....

Antagonist - The fatalist faction, which included Sheriff Guidry, Henri Pichot, and Mathew Antoine, believed that race determines your fate. They attempt to convince Grant that.....

Outcome - By the time Jefferson's execution date arrives, he understands his own importance as a symbol of pride and dignity for the entire black community. When he.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

On a day when Jefferson was supposed to go hunting, he ended up at the liquor store with his friends Brother and Bear. The trip suddenly turns into a robbery, and while Jefferson watches in horror, Brother, Bear, and Mr. Grope the storeowner, die in a shootout. Not knowing how to use the telephone, Jefferson unwisely grabs the money and gets caught leaving the store. At his trial, the defense attorney argues that Jefferson is innocent because a black man is no more capable of planning out this crime than a hog. A jury of twelve white men convicts Jefferson and he is sentenced to die by electrocution.

A few days later Grant returns home to find his Aunt and Miss Emma waiting for him. Stung by the attorney's comparison of Jefferson and a hog, Miss Emma asks Grant to visit Jefferson in prison and teach him to be a man. Grant goes with Miss Emma and Aunt Tante Lou to Henri Pichot's house to request that he talk to his brother-in-law Sheriff Guidry about allowing Grant to visit Jefferson in Miss Emma's place. Afterwards, Grant goes to the Rainbow Room and talks with Vivian, his girlfriend. He hates the town, hates his

THEMES

Major Themes - The major theme speaks to the destructive nature of fatalism versus the liberating ideals of individualism. It involves the belief that we can control our lives instead of being controlled by external forces. Grant and Jefferson learn there is a simple heroism in resisting the.....

Minor Themes - The novel suggests that freedom is a state of mind. Jefferson is incarcerated while Grant is free. Yet once Jefferson realizes that the white man can no longer punish him for.....

MOOD

As might be expected in a story about a death-row inmate, a somber mood prevails throughout the book. The two main characters, Jefferson and Grant, spend most of the novel wallowing in the mire of self-pity and trying to pull others down with them. In addition, the characters are.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Ernest Gaines bases many of his stories on his memories of childhood. He was born on a Louisiana plantation during the Great Depression. Like the schoolchildren in *Lesson Before Dying*, he worked in the fields digging potatoes. He was raised by his Augustine Jefferson, whom he considers one of the most courageous people he ever knew. This may explain why he gives the hero the name 'Jefferson'.

Ernest J. Gaines was born in 1933 in Louisiana. The Gaines family moved to Vallejo California when he was fifteen years old. While in Vallejo he discovered the public library and.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Readers of *A Lesson Before Dying* should understand the series of laws that created the segregated society described in the novel. After the American Civil War, Southern state legislatures enacted the Jim Crow laws, a series of codes that legalized separation of blacks and whites. The Supreme Court ruling in the case of Plessy versus Ferguson (1896) decided that separate facilities for blacks and.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

CHAPTER ONE

Summary

Everyone in town knew what the trial verdict would be. Tante Lou and Miss Emma attended every day. They listened as the prosecutor explained Jefferson's part in this terrible crime, even as Jefferson protested he had played no part. He had simply accompanied Brother and Bear to old man Grope's store for a bottle of wine. None of them had any money, but Brother and Bear explained that they could buy on credit, since grinding season would soon start and they could easily pay Grope back then. When Grope refused to give them the wine, however, Brother and Bear went behind the counter to take it. Grope got out his gun, and when the shooting was over everyone was dead except Jefferson. He had no idea what to do. He could telephone for help because he'd never used one before. He opened a bottle and took a drink to clear his mind. Then he saw the open cash register, and decided to take the money inside. With the money in his jacket and a bottle of whiskey in his hand he walked out of the store as two white men entered. That was his story.

The prosecution portrayed Jefferson as the mastermind who used Brother and Bear to rob the store. He drank he whiskey in celebration of its success. To counter this theory, the defense attorney explained that Jefferson had a limited level of intelligence. He was a fool, no more. Jefferson was capable of chopping wood, hauling water, or digging ditches, but not planning out a crime like this. He asked the jury what justice would there be in taking the life of this man – who was not even a man, really. He was a child. The defense concluded by saying he would “just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this.” (Page 8) After lunch on Friday, the jury of twelve

white men returned with its verdict: guilty of murder in the first degree. On Monday, the judge sentenced Jefferson to death by electrocution. The governor would set the date.

Notes

From the trial's beginning there was no doubt to the outcome. We are led to believe that Jefferson is innocent of murder, although guilty of robbery. But In 1940's Louisiana, there is little chance of a black man charged with killing a white storeowner being acquitted by a white jury. Jefferson will die, and nothing can stop that now.

Jefferson seems to be a good person, but extremely slow-witted. In his futile attempt to gain an acquittal, the defense attorney has furthered humiliated Jefferson and his family by comparing his client to a *hog*. These comments reveal the prevalent Southern stereotype that black men were somehow more than animals, but less than men. Notice Grant does not attend the trial.

CHAPTER TWO

Summary

When Grant returned home from school later that day he saw his Aunt Tante Lou and Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother, at the kitchen table. Miss Emma was the last person he wanted to see, since he and everyone else in the quarter knew what the verdict would be. He tried to avoid them by going quickly to his room and sitting down quietly to grade papers. Moments later his Aunt entered and asked him to come talk with Miss Emma. When he sits down, Miss Emma is starting out the window mumbling about how they called Jefferson a hog. She knows that Jefferson will die, but she wants him to die like a man instead of animal. Since Grant is a university graduate, and the town's black teacher, she wants him to take her place and visit Jefferson in the prison. Miss Emma would like Grant to help prepare Jefferson for the electric chair, so that he can die with dignity.

Grants protest, saying there's nothing he can do for Jefferson. The best he can hope to accomplish is to keep other black children from ending up in prison. But his Aunt insists he will do it, or find another place to live. Granted wanted to scream. He hated this small town. He hated teaching, and felt like he was going nowhere. He needed to go to Bayonne tonight, where he could breathe. But Miss Emma and his Aunt are determine to go visit Henri Pichot, whose brother-in-law is the sheriff, and Grant goes with them.

Notes

The exchange between Grant and the two women forms the beginning of the plot in this novel. Miss Emma has raised Jefferson since he was a baby, and as she says, she didn't raise him to act like a hog. She is in her last years, and watching Jefferson go to the chair with his head held high is all the satisfaction she can hope for after years of parenting. Somehow Grant must instill a sense of hope in both Jefferson and Miss Emma as both inch closer towards the grave.

This is our first real look at Grant, the narrator and protagonist in the story. Like the other black characters in the novel, he's unhappy with his life, but for a different reason. He has a university degree and teaches the black school in town. But He hates this town, he hates teaching, and he feels like he's running in place. He tells his Aunt he plans on going "to Bayonne where I can breathe...I can't breathe here." (Page 14). He feels trapped, both by the racism that exists in his community and by the expectations of his aunt.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Grant - As the main protagonist, Grant struggles to find a meaningful form of existence as an educated black man in the segregated South. Instead of improving his life, a university education only robs him of his former

blissful pleasures while burdening him with added questions about the meaning of life. At the beginning of the novel he sides with Mathew Antoine and the fatalists. Not only does he think his.....

Vivian - Vivian is a schoolteacher in Bayonne with extremely light-colored skin. Her family lives in Free LaCove, a community of mulattoes. The people in Free LaCove are.....

Aunt Tante Lou - Grant's aunt represents the ideal of self-sacrifice. She raised him from a baby because his parents left the South for California. She understands duty to family and community. She and Miss Emma both worked in Henri Pichot's kitchen for decades before finally retiring. She cut

Miss Emma - Like Tante Lou, she embodies self-sacrifice. She has spent her life raising Jefferson as his Godmother. Thus, she feels slighted when the defense attorney labels Jefferson a 'hog' because it renders her life's work meaningless – she didn't raise a hog. After that she continues to.....

Additional characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

A Lesson Before Dying is structured around Grant. The novel traces his individual growth as he works with Jefferson, and this development gives shape to the work's overall discussion of fatalism, individualism, heroism, and social injustice. From the start Grant is an angry, bitter, and self-absorbed person. He is angry at a society that, despite his university degree, will only allow him to teach other blacks. He blames his community for burdening him with unreasonable expectations and suffocating him instead of allowing him to leave Louisiana and pursue his own path. Most of all, he loathes himself for playing his role in a segregationist society and his own inability to somehow break free.

Grant does not attend Jefferson's trial for two reasons. First, it does not directly affect him and.....

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

Heroism - Grant explains to Jefferson that a hero is above other men because he thinks of others before himself. Although he understands the definition, he does not live it. He wants to live for himself. He starts a barfight in the Rainbow Room, believing he was doing it in defense of Jefferson. In fact, Grant was only thinking of himself never noticing how he hurt others. Not only did he tear up the bar, Vivian had to leave her job early to come drag him out. Following Grant's criterion, Rev. Ambrose is a hero, having put his entire.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

POINT OF VIEW

Grant tells the entire story in a first person narrative style. His narration reveals his fickle character. He is brooding right from the start, but also alternates between.....

QUOTATIONS – QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

1) “ *But let us say he was (guilty). Let us for a moment say he was (guilty). What justice would there be to take his life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this.*” (Page 8)

The public defender in Jefferson's case attempts to win leniency by claiming that Jefferson has diminished capacity to reason. It is an appeal to the belief that blacks were somehow sub-human. It is the quote that begins the action in the novel. From that point on Grant's mission in the book is to show Jefferson hope, dignity, and self-respect, and to prove to whites and blacks alike that it is possible to rise above your circumstances.

2) “*I still don't even know if the sheriff will let me see him. And suppose he did; what then? What do I say to*

him? Do I know what a man is? Do I know how a man is supposed to die? I'm still trying to find out how a man should live. Am I supposed to tell someone how to die who has never lived?" (Page 31)

Grant talks with Vivian about his Aunt's proposal that he visit Jefferson and try

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / METAPHORS / SYMBOLS

The Diary - Jefferson's diary is the reader's only glimpse into the inner workings of his mind. In it, Jefferson reflects on his connection to the rest of society and the injustice of his situation in a way that contributes to his transformation. He expresses his bewilderment that no one cared for him while he was alive, but now that he's on death row the whole town seems to be interested in him. More importantly, the diary represents..... Additional elements are discussed in the complete study guide.

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Full title - *A Lesson Before Dying*

Author - Ernest J. Gaines

Type of work - Novel

Genre - Fiction, Historical fiction, Social commentary

Language - American English

Date of first publication – 1993.....

STUDY QUESTIONS – MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1) Why does Vivian tell Grant she is disgusted by his behavior?

- A) He speaks disrespectfully to his aunt.
- B) He does think about anyone except himself.
- C) He refuses to go visit Jefferson when initially asked.
- A) He refuses to go to church.....

ANSWER KEY

1) B 2) A 3) D 4) A 5) C 6) C 7) B 8) B 9) A 10) C 11) D 12) B 13) B 14) A 15) D

ESSAY TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1) Vivian and Mathew Antoine are the only mulatto characters in the novel. Contrast their influence on Grant. What ideas do they each represent?

What does Rev. Ambrose mean when he tells Grant that he is the educated one and Grant is the "gump"? How is self-awareness a major theme of the novel?.....

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